

“Remembering Ariel Sharon”

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My current night-table reading – the book I am in the process of reading for my own pleasure and edification – is Lynne Withey’s 1982 biography of Abigail Adams, entitled “Dearest Friend.” The title is in reference to the loving manner in which the future first lady addressed a tender letter to her husband, John Adams... a letter written 220 years ago TODAY on January 18, 1794. John Adams used the same affectionate salutation when writing to his beloved wife – from whom he was frequently separated for extended periods while on the nation’s business. “Dearest Friend” are the words with which he wrote to Abigail in a letter dated January 18, 1797 – 217 years ago TODAY.

The biography is fascinating as a study of loving marriage and romantic partnership... of the Puritanical values of New England not unfamiliar to me as a fellow Massachusetts native... and – of course – of the political thought of both John AND Abigail Adams.

John Adams is remembered as the counsel for the defense in the Boston Massacre trial... as an architect of the Declaration of Independence... and as the first Vice President and second President of the United States. I have found myself growing more and more enamored of this historic personage as I read the life story of his “dearest friend,” Abigail. John was also among the first diplomats of the new-born American nation. Before the War for Independence was even over, John Adams was appointed as a commissioner to negotiate peace with Great Britain... and later as the first “Minister Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Court of Saint James.” That is, he was the first American Ambassador to Great Britain. In that role, he was charged with making and maintaining peace with a formerly bitter enemy with whom he had long advocated war... and with which a wholly new, groundbreaking relationship had to be forged. As a seasoned statesman, he was transformed, so to speak, from hawk to dovish diplomat. His “dearest friend” accompanied him to London.

This week, I have thought a great deal about John Adams... and wondered how a man of his wisdom, stature, and life experience might have responded to the death of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The two had much in common... though Sharon would never have been mistaken for a Massachusetts Puritan. Like Adams, Sharon’s political worldview and patriotic *bona fides* were forged in a War for Independence which followed years of British colonial rule. Like Adams, Sharon was long known as a hawkish advocate of military action. Like Adams, Sharon rose through the ranks of national leadership to lead his nation. Like Adams, Sharon – later in life – strove to bring peace to his nation by negotiation and conciliation of formerly intractable enemies he had long disdained.

I have wondered throughout this past week how a man of John Adams’ wisdom, stature, and life experience might have responded to the death of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon... because I was so GRAVELY disappointed with the official response of John Adams’ CURRENT successor as President to Sharon’s passing.

The White House released a presidential statement that said:

“On behalf of the American people, Michelle and I send our deepest condolences to the family of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and to the people of Israel on the loss of a leader who dedicated his life to the State of Israel... As Israel says goodbye to Prime Minister Sharon, we join with the Israeli people in honoring his commitment to his country.”

The statement makes no mention of the late Prime Minister’s efforts to achieve peace... no mention of his military achievements in the war against terrorism which the United States now continues... no mention of the unique role of the State of Israel as a lone bastion of stable democracy in a sea of despotism, repression, and anarchic revolution. No mention of any admirable quality or virtue in Ariel Sharon whatsoever... beyond that of patriotism – devotion to his country and cause. The White House statement thus struck me as an only slightly more polite reworking of Oscar Wilde’s famous axiom that **“Patriotism is the virtue of the vicious.”** I find the White House pronouncement offensive... not merely lacking in passion and sincerity... but lacking in wisdom and devoid of moral sensitivity... deficient even in appreciation for the very democratic system championed by the United States... and so evident in the Jewish State.

I wonder. What would John Adams – who advocated and celebrated the American revolution and then made peace as America’s pioneering representative to its former foe – have said of... or even TO Ariel Sharon?

Perhaps history provides an answer to my question. As a RABBINIC student of American history... as an American Jew... I am fascinated by a LATER correspondence between John Adams and Mordecai Manuel Noah – an early American Jewish newspaper editor, politician, and playwright... who advocated political Zionism. Noah wrote of the founding of a modern Jewish State as the only viable alternative to the long history of persecution of Jews by non-Democratic governments and their peoples. Noah forwarded his work to President John Adams. In an 1819 letter responding to Noah, Adams praised his **“judicious observations and ingenious reflections”**... adding:

“Farther could I find it in my heart to wish that you had been at the head of a hundred thousand Israelites... marching with them into Judea and making a conquest of that country and restoring your nation to the dominion of it. For I really wish the Jews again in Judea an independent nation.”

Ariel Sharon did indeed lead the soldiers of Israel by their hundreds of thousands. Though his tenure was often controversial and the execution of his duties was at times tragically flawed, the FACT that Ariel Sharon provided military leadership to an American ally and kindred democracy is properly to be celebrated by an American President... not ignored in *pro forma* pronouncements and grudgingly correct condolences. That is, IF it is still our national policy to **“wish the Jews again in Judea an independent nation”** – as it was during the Adams administration.

How I longed for a presidential statement of condolence that recognized Sharon as a man of vision and principle, who courageously led his nation first in a relentless war against tyranny and terror... and then wisely led his nation toward peace.

Short of such a presidential encomium – barring such “**judicious observations and ingenious reflections**” – unlikely indeed in the current political atmosphere... Ariel Sharon deserved at LEAST an unambiguous and unabashed affirmation of the mutuality that properly defines the relationship of the United States and Israel. Abigail and John Adams embodied that mutuality in their loving devotion to each other – a stable and faithful partnership that endured war and peace, distance, disagreement and personal losses, fickle friends and shifting alliances. Ariel Sharon deserved at LEAST an unambiguous and unabashed affirmation that the United States of America and the State of Israel to which the late Prime Minister devoted his entire life... are, in FACT... “DEAREST FRIENDS.”

Yehi Zichro Baruch – May his memory be a blessing. His life WAS a blessing.