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INTERVIEW WITH PRIME MINISTER FOR MADASSAH MAGAZINE

An interview with Israel's Prime Minister and Minister of Defense of nine months standing is a strangely relaxing experience. The warmth of the Prime Minister's brown eyes and kindly but very clever smile and glance envelopes you and disarms you. Here is a man with an immense joie de vivre, who enjoys whatever he is doing - whether unravelling a knotty political problem, making an important defense decision, building hundreds of villas for new immigrants - as he has - or simply in meeting fellow human beings.

The Prime Minister took the words out of my mouth.

"I know the first question you want to ask me." He took pleasure at my reaction, his strong features relaxing in a broad smile. He had hit the nail on the head. "You want to know what our major achievements have been and what we expect for the future." He did not bother to wait for my reply and went ahead at his usual pace.

"Without assigning any special order to the achievements I would say that we can look back, first of all, on a period of stability. With Governments tottering in our neighbouring countries almost every 'Monday and Thursday', with so-called revolutions and counter-revolutions, with armed interventions by one Arab country into the affairs of another, Israel stands out as an island

of democracy in the Middle East. The change in Government with the resignation of Mr. Ben-Gurion took place as if the Jewish people had been installing Prime Ministers without interruption since the time of Moses.

"Unfortunately, thus far there has been no response on the Arab side. However we will never give up the hope that peace will come in the Middle East. Meanwhile we must maintain our deterrent capacity as this is the only way of preventing war. The Arab leaders know that Israel will defend her homeland and rebuff any aggression.

"The maintenance of an adequate deterrent posture involves a heavy financial burden and a constant diversion of physical and spiritual resources. If the Middle East were relieved of the nightmare of the arms' race, both the Arab states and Israel could apply these resources to development and raising living standards.

"The scope of our international relations is constantly broadening.

"We note with gratification that the Johnson administration has stressed the continuing friendship between the U.S.A. and Israel.

"Since the signing of the treaty partially banning nuclear tests, there are the first indications of relaxation of world tension. While it is premature to



draw conclusions, the hope of a new era opening up in international relations has received impetus. We hope that ultimately the Middle East too will benefit from a lessening of world tension. Israel has welcomed Chairman Khrushchev's note on the banning of war as a means of settling international disputes."

On the question of the possibility of improved relations with the Soviet Union, the Prime Minister was hesitant to reply but then said, "we certainly look forward to such an improvement, and to a more positive Soviet understanding of the nature of our national revival and its constructive and peaceful purpose."

"Israel's ties with the developing countries of Africa and Asia are constantly deepening.

"Our programme of economic and technical co-operation and sharing with these new countries is rooted in a common outlook on the value of international co-operation as the basic theme of twentieth century progress."

"Economically, the policies which we introduced over two years ago have avoided inflation and continued the increase of production and exports. The Israel citizen will have to continue to display maturity - the problems that face us are still great. Taxation will have to be borne by all of us with a smile, and the standard-of-living will have to rise more slowly than at present.

"We have managed as well to keep abreast of the great wave of immigration which is still reaching us, and this burden alone is no small one. The participation of American Jewry -- through UJA and Bonds has been outstanding. Recently, though UJA's continuing work has not kept pace with the needs. It has been providing less money to the Jewish Agency, thus compelling the Government and the Israeli taxpayer to assume an even greater burden. In spite of this, through great efforts, we have succeeded in absorbing the newcomers into new homes without reverting to 'maabarot'.

"I would submit that it is unfair and unjustified that Israel should continue to bear the burden beyond all proportion, for the resettlement of Jews fleeing from oppression. This is a responsibility which morally and historically devolves on the entire Jewish people.

"Enough!" said the Prime Minister, "I could go on and on. I could tell you about the relaxation of military government provisions for almost all our Arab citizens; the shortening of military service for our boys and girls; about the great new developments planned for the Galilee and in the Negev; about water projects -- from the Kinneret-Negev pipeline to sweetening of salt water. But this is enough. After all, in every area, we can talk about progress.



But rather than talk, I would prefer that people, particularly our fellow Jews come and see with their own eyes. How does the saying go, "—the Prime Minister is a great lover of proverbs, biblical quotations and sayings, "the sight of the eyes is better than the flight of the soul."

The Prime Minister took a piece of hard sugar into his hands and with the strength stemming from his fare days in orange groves, and in the fields of Degania, snapped it in two. He took a sip of dark tea which is served to him - "a la Russe" - in a glass. He is still proud of his membership in Degania and has an almost mystical attraction to his youth in Petah Tikva, where he put in his first days' work in an orange grove.

"Is there something you can tell us about progress in the field of education?"

The Prime Minister nodded as if to say, I knew we would get around to that sooner or later. He sat back in his chair, behind the large desk in his simply appointed office. His face changed. He spoke in more measured terms, but soon active enthusiasm overwhelmed him and one could just see new schools and the new programmen rising simply from the power of his personality and will.

"I do not have to tell you, - I mean the people who are active in Hadassah, - of the great gap which exists in Israel. We have taken in hundreds of

thousands of families whose bread-winners are not equipped with trades, professions or capital. They come from countries where in the past, Jewish culture was at a peak, but where education today is very poor or not available.

"Many of them have very large families, six, seven or eight children - and more! We have over the last years constructed imposing housing projects for the immigrants and have brought them from the ship directly to permanent homes. However, at this stage of mass immigration we cannot provide especially comfortable quarters for large immigrant families. Large or small, these families must live in standard housing and so the home becomes over-crowded and there is hardly a corner where a child can open up a book to read.

"High school education is not yet free. We are searching for ways of solving this problem. For example we have introduced reduced rates and in some cases free tuition, but this does not cover enough of the children. It is our aim to make it possible for promising pupils to study in high school or vocational school. We have begun to provide guided afternoon studies, so that if there is no quiet place at home, or if the parents are unequipped to help a child with homework, he will be able to do it in a proper environment and with an instructor to aid him.



"We are beginning to help families with many children, by opening free nurseries at the pre-kindergarten age, especially in new immigrant centres where there are families with many children.

"To do all this, we must spend money, - hundreds of millions of pounds - to build new comprehensive schools from Kiryat Shmonah in the North to Eilat in the South. We must train hundreds and even thousands of teachers. We must help the children of the hundreds of thousands of newcomers - 'for from the sons of the poor comes forth Torah' -- to obtain a high-school or vocational training. This is a nine qua non if Israel is to fulfill her destiny as the People of the Book.

"To live and to advance in the age of technology and science we must embark on a massive programme to raise the educational level of the entire population and to close the gap between the veteran and the newcomer. Following security, this is our number one problem; equal in importance to the attaining of economic independence."

Time was running out. The Prime Minister has a constant whirl of meetings, appointments and consultations running from eight in the morning till eight, nine and ten o'clock, if not later, at night. Although the Prime Minister was

relaxed and ready to continue I felt that the time had come to thank him on behalf of Eadsash Magazine.

"Surely you are not leaving without asking me about religious questions?"

It was my turn to smile. "Let me tell you in a nutshell that I am very anxious to avoid, at this stage in our development, any kind of 'Kulturkampf' on religious questions. This is the period of ingathering, we should not divert our efforts from this great historic task, which is the joint aim of the Jewish people today. All segments of our population must live together in peace and harmony. In our Declaration of Independence and in the basic principles of all the Governments we have had, we have insisted on freedom of conscience and mutual tolerance. We have undertaken to prevent coercion whether religious or anti-religious.

"No where in the world is there living Judaism as in Israel. The Sabbath and holidays form the basic rythm of the State's life, Kashrut is observed in all institutions sponsored by the State. Marriage and divorce are in accordance with Jewish law.

"In many cases the non-observant segment of the population has, for the sake of the unity of Israel, made allowances to religious practice and feelings,



and this should be borne in mind by Jews abroad and in Israel. Attempts to interfere in Israel's problems through threats is unfair and unZionistic. The road to mutual understanding is open in both directions and must run in both directions.

"Through mutual understanding we could perhaps have reached a happier solution with regard to the kashrut issue on the "SEALOM" and other issues as well. The key is to avoid extremism and to find that 'golden path' which Maimonides spoke about, or in simpler terms, 'to live and let live!'"

American Jewry knows Levi Eshkol as Israel's Minister of Finance but will, within the next few months, have the opportunity of seeing him in person as Israel's Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. He has been invited to confer with President Johnson and is looking forward to meeting U.S. Jewish leaders as well.

About this meeting, Mr. Eshkol said, "I shall be happy to meet President Johnson and have the opportunity of discussing mutual problems with him. I am sure that our meetings will strengthen the traditional friendship between Israel and the United States. I am hopeful that we will be able to strengthen peace in the Middle East as well.

"On my visit, I look forward to renewing my personal contact with the great American Jewish community, which together with Israel, bears the major responsibility for continuity in our time.

Mr. Rabbol's visit may also introduce his wife Miriam to his many friends in the United States. The Prime Minister married recently. He had been a widower for over four years.

Levi Rabbol brings to his office the innate qualities of outstanding leadership. This leadership has been tested in a remarkable record of building the nation over decades. As you talk with him, you cannot fail to be caught up by his faith, steadfastness, optimism and dedication. It is these qualities which have brought him to the pinnacle of a career which began in the orange groves of Patah Tikva and in Degania, on the shores of the Kinneret, many years ago. It is these qualities which will define in large measure Israel's course in the coming years.