

Community mourns, remembers Sharon



As news of Former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's death rippled through South Florida's Jewish community, it was clear he left an indelible mark on history and set a decisive tone for his beloved Israel.

Sharon, one of Israel's most iconic and controversial figures, died Jan. 10 at age 85, at Chaim Sheba Medical Center near Tel Aviv after being in a coma for eight years.

Either loved or loathed, Sharon's passing left few without comment.

Rabbi Bruce Warshal, publisher emeritus of the *Jewish Journal*, met Sharon in the '80s on a trip for Peace Now, an organization that advocates for "a politically negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

At the time, there was much debate over Sharon ordering Israeli troops off the Gaza Strip, prompting fears of chaos, especially because the head of the Palestine Authority had not been alerted of a time frame. "Sharon would not talk to him," Warshal said. "He did not care."

Warshal likened Sharon to controversial U.S. General George Patton, "brilliant but reckless."

"He was an expansionist," Warshal said. "He wanted peace on his own terms, but his terms were so absurd that no respectable Palestinian would accept them. He was arrogant with power."

There are some who adored him and others who felt he had not served his country well, Warshal said, and varying groups within South Florida's Jewish community will reflect on his legacy differently. Warshal, pointing out the *Jewish Journal* — the nation's largest Jewish weekly — does not take sides and made it clear his opinions on Sharon are his own.

"He never understood their (the Palestine) narrative," Warshal said. "When you don't respect the narrative, you don't have peace."

Carol Flatto, South Florida Chapter Chair, Americans for a Safe Israel said Sharon was "a man whom people either loved or loathed."

"He was called "the Bulldozer," but he was a betrayer because he destroyed the Jewish settlements of Gush Katif and Yamit," she said. "No one disputed his great military skills, but he had no regard for the human toll it took and still takes. We know from personal experience and visits with the refugees, many of them still in temporary homes, jobless, and suffering psychological trauma, that the withdrawal from Gaza did not bring peace. It only created a launching pad for rockets into Israel."

U.S. Rep. Ted Deutch, D-Boca Raton, called Sharon "a steadfast defender" of the State of Israel. "Though his political party and political views evolved, one thing did not change through his many years as a leader in the army, the government, and as Prime Minister," Deutch said. "His legacy and historical imprint on Israel is profound and lasting."

Matthew C. Levin, president and CEO, Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County, said Sharon was an "impressive and larger than life figure."

"He represented the best of what Zionism was about, a deep concern for the people and the Land of Israel," Levin said. "The lessons of Sharon and all that encompasses need to be taught to the next generation."

Dr. Zeev Rothstein, director of the Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer, Israel that treated Sharon, visited South Florida to speak to congregants of Beth Torah Benny Rok Campus in North Miami Beach during a Shabbat morning service on the Saturday following the breaking news of the former prime minister's death.

"I knew Ariel Sharon as a person," Rothstein said. "He had a warm personality, he had a big smile over his face, he had a good sense of humor and everybody loved him."

Rabbi Dr. Michael Korman of Temple Anshei Shalom in West Palm Beach said Sharon will be remembered for his "fearless and courageous military and political leadership" for nearly half a century. "He was a remarkable general and prime minister, who put Israel's security above all else."

Rachel Miller, director of the American Jewish Committee Palm Beach Regional office, said Sharon was committed to a goal.

"During his time as prime minister, Sharon focused on a two-state solution, a goal that, even today, has tragically proved unachievable," she said. "He also devoted considerable attention, over many years, to relations with Jordan and developed close personal ties with its leaders, as he did with several other Arab rulers."

Rabbi Sheldon J. Harr, founding senior rabbi emeritus of Temple Kol Ami Emanu-El in Plantation said, "With the death of Ariel Sharon, Israel has lost a true patriot, an ardent Zionist, an amazingly unique leader, a military genius and a statesman."

Sid Dinerstein, former chairman of the Palm Beach County Republican Party said Ariel Sharon was known as the "Lion of God." "He was such a great warrior that the Israelis could trust him to negotiate for peace. He will be remembered always."

Rabbi Jessica Brockman, associate rabbi of Temple Beth El of Boca Raton, called Sharon "one of Israel's heroes."

"He was a general. People knew him and admired his bravery," she said. In advocating the withdrawal from Gaza, he showed that "someone could change their position and come back to the center."

Former Congressman Ron Klein, D- Boca Raton, summed up what may well be Sharon's historic legacy.

"Ariel Sharon was a military man who had his share of controversies," Klein said, "but was also willing to lead his country by taking big chances for peace."