

BEGIN'S INTEGRITY COMPLIMENTED

Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said this week that the recent improvement in U.S. - Israel relations was "primarily due to the integrity, steadfastness and moral courage of Menachem Begin."

Addressing the UAHC board of trustees at its semi - annual meeting, Rabbi Schindler declared:

"The new era of good feeling between Washington and Jerusalem and the restoration of the partnership between the two democracies bode well for Israel's security and American strategic interests."

The Reform Jewish leader cited four examples of the strengthening of ties between Jerusalem and Washington in recent weeks:

"For the first time, we see the State Department urging Israel not to pull back its forces in Lebanon, lest Syria have no incentive to withdraw, he said, adding:

"For the first time, the U.S. has approved the transfer of technology for the development of Israel's own jet fighter, the Lavie.

"For the first time, there is pressure not on Israel but on the Arab states -- Syria and Jordan -- to make the concessions necessary for reducing tensions in the region and restoring progress to the Camp David peace process.

"For the first time, Secretary of Defense

Caspar Weinberger is publicly praising Israel, underscoring its strategic value to the United States, warning that other nations would see our country as 'unreliable' if we were to 'abandon' Israel. The Defense Secretary even cited Israel as an example to follow for 'remaining vigilant -- even when others call them inflexible'."

Rabbi Schindler was referring to a letter from Secretary Weinberger, dated May 27, to the Long Island (N.Y.) Jewish World, responding to criticism from Senator Alfonse D'Amato (Rep., N.Y.) that he was "inflexible" in opposing cuts in the U.S. defense budget. The Weinberger letter, published in the Jewish weekly's June 10 - 16 issue, said in part:

"When it comes to national security, we Americans must learn to persevere, -- in the face of short - term political pressures, in the face of reluctance to acknowledge the threats we face. It is a lesson we could and should learn from the Israelis, who have always understood that they best preserve peace and freedom by remaining vigilant -- even when others call them intransigent."

Rabbi Schindler asked: "How did these things happen?"

"It is not Israel that has changed -- it is the American understanding of Israel that has altered. And that is primarily due to the integrity, steadfastness and moral courage of Menachem Begin.

"Mr. Begin's consistency, his certitude in the justice of his country's cause, his refusal to surrender to pressure -- the very qualities that once branded him 'stubborn' and 'intransigent' -- are responsible for the new appreciation in Washington of Israel's importance to America, and thus of the new tone in the U.S. -- Israel relationship." The UAHC leader continued:

"Under powerful attack for refusing to sign a withdrawal agreement with Lebanon in the absence of adequate security guarantees, Mr. Begin held firm. Today our country is pleading with Israel to stay in Lebanon so that Syria will have an inducement to withdraw as well.

"Under strong compulsion to accept the PLO as a negotiating partner, Mr. Begin never wavered. Today the mutiny and civil war within the terrorist ranks confirm what the Israeli Prime Minister has been saying all along: that the PLO represents only the warring factions within it -- not the Palestinian Arabs -- and have no place at the peace table.

"Under intense criticism for refusing to accept Jordanian preconditions for coming to the peace table, Mr. Begin stood his ground. Today the world knows why the Camp David process has ground to a halt. When Jordan

declined the most recent invitation to talk peace with Israel, King Hussein accurately identified the real obstacle to peace: not Israel's settlement policy on the West Bank (which Hussein didn't even mention) but the PLO's veto of any negotiations with Israel.

"Since the day he took office," Rabbi Schindler told the UAHC board, "Prime Minister Begin has been the favorite whipping boy of 'liberal' pundits, Third World dictators and Soviet slander -- not to mention State Department Arabists who painted his integrity as intransigence and his patriotism as imperialism.

"Now even the Secretary of Defense -- the architect of the AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia -- praises Israel for 'remaining vigilant' as the way to 'best preserve peace and freedom'."

Rabbi Schindler continued:

"Prime Minister Begin is not everyone's cup of tea. He speaks too bluntly for some, refusing to dissemble even when it is the more politic or diplomatic course to follow. I have found myself in strong disagreement with him on more than one occasion. But he has been right far more often than wrong. And he is a man of peace, a man who keeps his word.

"Perhaps it was these qualities that Anwar Sadat recognized and that led him to make his historic flight to Jerusalem. It was surely Mr. Begin's insistence on scrupulously adhering to the terms of the treaty with Egypt that led to its full implementation, despite fierce opposition from Israeli citizens who had been among his strongest supporters -- and doubts from the rest of the world that Israel would ever return the Sinai with its oil wells, air bases and strategic depth as protection against Arab attack.

"In the six years since he became Prime Minister, Mr. Begin has proved himself a man of principle, pledged to the security and dignity of his people, a fervent friend and ally of America -- and a staunch advocate of democratic principles. Israel's leader richly merits the growing appreciation among American policy makers of his integrity and courage, devotion to his country and commitment to peace."

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