T HE 12 MONTHS FROM July 1, 1995, to June 30, 1996, marked one of the most traumatic periods in Israel's 48-year history.

Growing disaffection with the phased handover of power to the Palestinians, fueled by a string of suicide bombings carried out by Islamic extremists, left the Israeli public hopelessly divided over the merits of proceeding with the peace process. Opposition to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's policies mounted through the autumn of 1995. And on the night of November 4, that opposition culminated in the assassination of Rabin, shot dead by a right-wing extremist Israeli, an Orthodox Jew, Yigal Amir.

Shimon Peres, the foreign minister who had co-orchestrated the peace process with Rabin, succeeded him in office and helped to restore at least a veneer of stability to Israeli society. But when Peres called elections for May 29, the closeness of the race for the prime ministership—against Likud candidate Benjamin Netanyahu—underlined the extent to which the rift over the peace process persisted.

Although opinion polls after the Rabin assassination suggested that Peres would win the election easily, his credibility and that of the peace process were badly undermined by a new round of Hamas suicide bombings inside Israel in the spring, and by Peres's ill-fated effort to silence Hezbollah gunmen in south Lebanon with a massive aerial assault just a few weeks before polling day.

Netanyahu, although a relatively inexperienced politician, fought a far stronger campaign and emerged victorious by a margin of fewer than 30,000 votes, less than 1 percent of the electorate. He set about building a coalition with the support of a new immigrant party, a new centrist grouping, and three Orthodox parties whose Knesset representation greatly increased. Netanyahu pledged to continue the peace process, but his disinclination to meet with Yasir Arafat and his opposition to a land-for-peace agreement with Syria on the Golan Heights left the future of that process in some doubt.

POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC DEVELOPMENTS

Handover of Power to the Palestinians

Following the signing of the Gaza-and-Jericho-first agreement in Cairo on May 4, 1994, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators had moved on to the more com-
plex talks on the next phase of the handover of power, involving an Israeli military withdrawal from parts of the West Bank and the holding of Palestinian elections. The talks were beset by innumerable disputes among the negotiators and, more critically, by the intermittent acts of terrorism carried out against Israeli targets by Hamas and its Islamic extremist offshoot, Islamic Jihad.

A chain of suicide bombings in 1994 and the first half of 1995—including attacks at Afulah and Haderah in April 1994; at Tel Aviv and Netzarim in Gaza in October 1994; at Beit Lid in January 1995; and at Kfar Darom in Gaza in April 1995—left close to 70 civilians dead and hundreds injured. And the bombings continued into the period under review: A Hamas-engineered bus bombing in Ramat Gan on July 24, 1995, left six Israelis dead, and another in Jerusalem on August 21 left four more Israelis dead.

If the relative calm of the late spring and early summer had enabled the peace negotiators to resume their talks in a more serious and positive atmosphere, these July and August bombings reawakened Israeli concerns about the wisdom of any West Bank military redeployment. Despite increasingly vocal opposition from right-wing Israeli politicians and their supporters, and the very public reservations about the efficacy of the entire process expressed by respected national figures such as President Ezer Weizman, Prime Minister Rabin publicly pledged himself to the continued implementation of the autonomy process, while privately demanding more forceful action against the extremists from Palestinian Authority head Yasir Arafat as a precondition for substantive progress in the negotiations.

Specifically, Rabin’s fear was of Islamic extremists filling the vacuum after a West Bank army redeployment, as they had apparently been able to do to some extent in Gaza, with yet more costly consequences. While it was feasible for the Israeli army to seal off Gaza, with its perimeter fence, and prevent many if not all efforts by would-be bombers to cross into sovereign Israel, the West Bank was a different proposition. A failure by Arafat’s security forces to clamp down on Hamas and other radicals following an Israeli army pullout would leave the bombers with the simple task of crossing into sovereign Israel via one of hundreds of paths, tracks, and roads, or traversing fields, with potentially devastating consequences. Rabin had commissioned a plan for erecting a vast security fence to separate Israel from the West Bank, but the cost and the political implications of setting up a new de facto border kept the plan on the back burner. In its absence, and with the bombings providing ongoing gruesome evidence of Hamas’s capacity for violence, Rabin remained reluctant to sanction the pullout.

The stagnation of the negotiations and the sense that Arafat had yet to prove himself a committed partner in the battle against the Islamic radicals led to a dramatic upsurge in antigovernment protest and criticisms of the autonomy process. A new right-wing movement, Zo Artzeinu (This Is Our Land), organized several days of street protests in late summer, sending activists to block traffic at key intersections around the country. Ariel Sharon, the Likud Knesset member and former defense minister, renewed his public attacks on Arafat’s peace credentials, de-
nouncing the Palestinian leader as a war criminal whom Israel ought to bring to trial, and staged a well-publicized hunger strike along with several other opposition politicians, to draw attention to what he termed the “deteriorating security situation.”

Israeli disillusionment with the accords was fed by the unending sequence of violent attacks, apart from suicide bombings. In early September, for example, a Palestinian radical stabbed to death a British-born settler, Daniel Frei, inside his own home at Ma’aleh Mikhmash, a small settlement east of Jerusalem in the West Bank. His wife was wounded in the attack.

The vocal opposition to the peace process, especially the right-wing assertion that the Rabin government lacked Jewish legitimacy because of its reliance on Arab Knesset support, gave rise to concerns about possible physical attacks on members of the government. Police Minister Moshe Shahal had narrowly escaped being mobbed at the scene of one of the bus bombings; a West Bank settler tried to run the car carrying left-wing environment minister Yossi Sarid off the main Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway; and Israeli newspapers carried prominent articles quoting senior officials in the security establishment warning of the possibility of an attempt on the life of a government minister. As the man regarded as the initiator of the peace process and the politician most photographed in Arafat’s company, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was cited as the most likely target.

*Oslo II Accord*

Despite the obstacles, Israel and the PLO moved gradually toward completion of what became known as the Oslo II accord — the Gaza-Jericho agreement having been labeled Oslo I. Foreign Minister Peres, who met face to face with Yasir Arafat on six occasions between March and September 1995 — was satisfied with the agreement he had hammered out with the PLO head as early as July 4. Indeed, that night, Israel Television news led its nightly broadcast with a report that the deal had been concluded, and that a White House ceremony was being arranged for some time in the following two weeks. But Rabin pronounced himself unhappy with many of the clauses, and a series of revisions were agreed to over the following two and a half months. The 314-page accord — with its 31 articles, seven annexes, and nine accompanying maps — was finally ready for signature on September 24, finalized after a weeklong session of nonstop talks at the Egyptian beach resort of Taba.

The accord essentially divided the West Bank into three categories of territorial status. Inside Area A — which included the major Palestinian cities of Jenin, Tulkarm, Nablus, Qalqilya, Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Hebron (Jericho was already Arafat-controlled) — Arafat was to be granted responsibility for security and all civil affairs. Inside Area B — 450 towns and villages with heavy concentrations of Palestinians — Arafat was to be granted responsibility for civil affairs and public order, and Israel was to retain overall responsibility for security. In-
side Area C—the remainder of the West Bank, comprising some 70 percent of the territory—Arafat was to take control of Palestinian civil affairs, and an elected Palestinian Council was eventually to gain partial territorial jurisdiction and partial responsibility for Palestinian internal security, while Israel was to retain responsibility for security and for the settlers.

The accord provided a detailed timetable for this gradual transition. Slated for signature at the White House on September 28, it was to be presented for Knesset approval the following week; within days, the release of Palestinian prisoners and the closure of some West Bank Israeli Civil Administration offices would mark the symbolic start of implementation. November 19 was set down as the date for the start of the substantive Israeli army redeployment, with troops leaving first from Jenin—the northernmost city in the West Bank—followed by Tulkarm, Qalqilya, Nablus, Bethlehem, and Ramallah, all by the end of 1995. The redeployment in Hebron was a more complicated affair, given the presence in the center of the city of some 450 Jewish settlers. Accordingly, it was decided that the Hebron pullout would be delayed until the end of March, and that the city would not be handed over completely to Arafat's control even then. Instead, a contingent of Israeli troops would remain in a clearly defined area of the city, with specific responsibility for the settlers' security.

The next agreed phase of the process was the holding of Palestinian elections—tentatively scheduled for January 20, 1996—at which Palestinians from the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem would elect the members of a Palestinian Council and a Palestinian Authority president.

For the first time, the accord set a deadline for the revision of the PLO's guiding covenant. The charter had to be amended to excise clauses calling for Israel's destruction, or canceled, within two months of the inauguration of the elected Palestinian Council. The issue of the covenant had assumed immense symbolic importance for the Israeli public, which was awaiting its cancellation or amendment as a supreme test of the PLO's commitment to the peace process.

Finally, the accord set a date for the commencement of "final status" talks between Israel and the Palestinians: May 4, 1996. This date would mark the start of negotiations on the most emotive and complex issues of Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation: Palestinian claims to Jerusalem, the final status of the West Bank, the fate of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, the precise delineation of borders between Israel and the neighboring Palestinian entity, and other matters. Three years were budgeted for these talks, with a completion date no later than May 4, 1999.

For Oslo II to work, especially the initial Israeli pullout from major cities, unprecedented cooperation was required between the Israeli and Palestinian security forces. A plethora of joint mechanisms were designed to resolve every conceivable crisis—joint committees handling everything from election issues and security to economic and scientific cooperation. The accord delineated not only such obvious basic issues as the size of the Palestinian police force (12,000 in the
West Bank; 18,000 in Gaza) but also such minutiae as quarrying rights, allocation of radio frequencies, and procedures for livestock transit.

Hopes for cooperation notwithstanding, Rabin and Peres recognized that it was simply untenable for West Bank Jewish settlers to continue to travel through the Arafat-controlled Area A sections on their way to and from home. To that end, an investment estimated at $100 million was made in completing a network of new or improved bypass roads—to serve as army-patrolled alternatives to the settlers’ existing routes through cities now being turned over to Arafat. The timetable for the pullout from each city was finalized to coincide with the completion of adequate bypass routes for settlers in that area. For example, the pullout from Ramallah was timed for December, by which time it was anticipated that Route 60, a newly constructed bypass route for settlers who hitherto traveled through Ramallah to settlements such as Ofrah and others further to the north, would be completed and ready for use.

The Oslo II accord was signed at the White House on September 28—two years and two weeks after that first reluctant Rabin-Arafat handshake on the White House lawn. This time the ceremony was markedly more modest, but the atmosphere was noticeably more good-natured. Rabin, whose barometer for the viability of the entire process could be summed up in the single word “security,” had been receiving briefings from his military advisers in recent weeks to the effect that Arafat was now making a far greater effort to track down key Hamas activists and frustrate their plans for violence. In the light of these assessments, it was a far more relaxed Rabin who listened patiently to a lengthy oration from Arafat in Washington that day, and then cracked a most uncharacteristic and conspicuously good-natured joke about the PLO leader. Remarking that it was the Jews who were supposed to be the masters of eloquent oratory, he joked that he was beginning to wonder if perhaps the chairman might have a trace of Jewish blood. President Clinton, hosting the ceremony, laughed broadly, as did Arafat, who patted the prime minister on the back as the pair left the room at the end of the ceremony.

For Rabin, the accord represented the relinquishing of Israeli day-to-day control over Palestinian lives, without undermining Israeli national security—a pragmatic end to 28 years of occupation. It was rendered immeasurably complex by the presence of the West Bank settlers, but he believed the bypass road network would alleviate the major security problems. For the opposition, by contrast, Oslo II amounted to the abandonment of the settlers and a blueprint for an eventual withdrawal all the way back to pre-1967 borders, with a Palestinian state inevitably filling the vacuum.

The Israeli public was sharply divided on the issue. The days of two-thirds public support for the process—endorsing Rabin’s self-styled gamble for peace when the process began in September 1993—had long gone. Polls showed a 50–50 split or thereabout, a consequence of the ongoing Islamic violence. The Knesset reflected that division perfectly, and when the House came to vote on the pact on
the night of October 5, it was unclear whether the required majority would even be achieved. Alex Goldfarb, who had been elected to the Knesset on the right-wing Tsomet ticket but subsequently defected to the government benches as part of the breakaway Yi'ud faction and became a deputy minister, refused to disclose how he was going to vote. In the early hours of October 6, when the voting finally began, he opted to support the accord, sealing its approval by a margin of 61 votes to 59.

In presenting the accord to the Knesset, Rabin set out in more detail than ever before how he envisaged a final status agreement with the Palestinians taking shape. As promised, the Oslo II accord left all Jewish settlements untouched for the interim autonomy period. In a final accord, he told the Knesset, he would seek to maintain the settlements of the Jordan Valley to strengthen the eastern security border he intended to retain there. He would also seek to expand sovereignty in the Jerusalem area deeper into the West Bank, to encompass major settlements such as Ma'aleh Adumim and Givat Ze'ev. The old 1967 Green Line border would also, he hoped, be moved eastward in other areas to bring settlements inside Israeli sovereign rule. And small, remote settlements in the West Bank might be relocated in Jewish “settlement blocs,” maintained under Israeli rule. The details were not entirely specific, and they did little to calm settler fears, but Rabin was hardly going to give away all the elements of his anticipated opening bargaining position with the Palestinians.

**Opposition and Implementation**

If Israeli opposition to the Gaza-and-Jericho-first deal had been primarily motivated by security concerns, the fierce criticisms of this latest accord emphasized a different element: the idea, promulgated by many leading Orthodox rabbis, that there was something “un-Jewish” about the deal, that no secular government had the right to relinquish territory divinely promised to the Jews in the Bible. In July 1995 a group of 15 leading rabbis, led by former chief rabbi Avraham Shapira, had issued a ruling to the effect that the dismantling of military bases in the West Bank threatened Jewish life, and that soldiers should therefore refuse any orders to do so. An earlier ruling had already forbidden the evacuation of settlements. And a smaller group of rabbis, including Dov Lior from Kiryat Arba, had gone so far as to solicit opinions from learned colleagues worldwide about the status of Rabin and other government ministers under Jewish law as possible accomplices to murder because of the policies they were pursuing. "Would it not be appropriate," Lior and two colleagues asked in a letter sent to some 40 colleagues, “to warn the prime minister and other ministers that if they continue to turn the residents of Judea, Samaria and Gaza over to the rule of murderers, according to Jewish law it will be necessary to put them on trial and punish them according to the law of a ‘moser’?”

As the religious dimension to the opposition to Rabin intensified, so did the
frequent protests against the Rabin government. One such demonstration was held in central Jerusalem on October 5, to coincide with the critical Knesset debate on Oslo II. In his address to the tens of thousands of angry demonstrators in Zion Square, Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu lambasted the Rabin government for seeking to win parliamentary approval for such crucial agreements on the strength of votes from Arab Knesset members and defectors like Goldfarb. As had become routine at such protests, sections of the crowd kept up a constant barrage of shouts of “Rabin is a traitor” and “Rabin is a murderer,” which Netanyahu tried in vain to silence. Rehavam Ze’evi, leader of the far-right Mokedt Knesset faction, told the crowd, “This is an insane government, that has decided to commit national suicide,” and Ariel Sharon charged that the Rabin government had “collaborated with a terror organization.” The customary placards of Rabin with his features overlaid by a gunsight were also on display, as was a new poster that showed Rabin in the uniform of an SS officer.

When the speeches were over, tens of thousands of demonstrators marched to the Knesset, where the debate was still going on. Flaming torches were hurled at the policemen who blocked their route to the Knesset plaza. When Housing Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer left the building after the vote, he was spotted by Kach activists and his car was attacked. “I’ve seen Hezbollah, I’ve seen Hamas, but I’ve never seen anything like this,” the shaken minister said afterward. Demonstrators also found their way to Rabin’s car and vandalized it.

While the radical protestors became ever more inflammatory, more mainstream voices were also raised against the agreement or aspects of it. President Weizman, who had repeatedly called for a suspension of peace talks and a reassessment of the entire process in previous months, said he felt the deal had been negotiated with undue haste and criticized the final weeklong session of Taba talks because it had left the negotiators without sufficient sleep. Weizman was also quoted as having said in private conversations that he was uncomfortable with the narrow majority the accord had earned in the Knesset, jibing that it had all depended on “Goldfarb’s Mitsubishi” — a reference to the perk of a government car that Yi’ud defector Goldfarb had received as a deputy minister.

Another to sound a cautionary note was Joseph Alpher, the former director of Tel Aviv University’s Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, who had produced an acclaimed blueprint for the future division of the West Bank a year earlier. Alpher, now the director of the American Jewish Committee’s Israel office, spoke of the inherent contradiction at the root of Oslo II: territorial control was being relinquished, but the settlements established precisely to prevent such relinquishing of territory were not being removed. Small isolated settlements in the West Bank were likely to become points of friction, he feared, as had Netzarim, an isolated settlement in the Gaza Strip. “In the West Bank, you have 30 Netzarims,” said Alpher, “you have thousands of people who have to pass through Palestinian areas, and you’ve seen the rise of Jewish radicals prepared to use violence against Arabs, if not Jews. There is a higher potential risk of bloodshed.”
Alpher's West Bank blueprint had provided for the annexation of some 11 percent of the West Bank, the lines carefully drawn to encompass about 70 percent of the settlers, boost border security, and bring only a small number of Palestinians—some 40,000—under Israeli rule. One of his concerns about Oslo II was that it gave at least a limited degree of autonomy to all of the Palestinians—even those living in Area C, where Arafat was being granted immediate responsibility for Palestinian civil affairs. What that meant was that any subsequent demand by Israel, in the final status talks, to expand its sovereignty into areas of the West Bank, would amount to an attempt to reverse the autonomous status already enjoyed by Palestinians in these areas, an attempt hardly likely to be welcomed by Palestinian negotiators. The granting of autonomy to every Palestinian, Alpher noted, would present "additional constraints" for Israel's negotiators at the final status talks.

Confidence in the viability of the Oslo II accord was somewhat boosted by the comments of the Israeli army officials charged with its implementation. In briefings at the time the accord was being signed and approved, army officials highlighted the relative success of the Gaza-and-Jericho-first agreement, which had established a successful precedent for Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, on joint security patrols, in intelligence sharing, and so on.

Brig. Gen. Barukh Spiegel, the army's deputy coordinator of activities in the territories and a participant in the talks on Oslo II, said the Palestinians were clearly committed to achieving a compact, but that "the true test is now, in the implementation." Oslo I, he felt, had been "a successful experiment. There have been attacks, but there is a stabilization, a moderation."

Such pragmatic, on-the-ground assessments did little or nothing to moderate the mounting opposition both to the accords and to the Rabin government. On October 10, just days after the Knesset had approved the agreement, Rabin was loudly jeered when he tried to address a 15,000-strong gathering of Israelis of Anglo-Saxon origin at the Wingate Sports Institute outside Netanyah. "You should be ashamed of yourselves," he bellowed at the hecklers. "Rabin, resign," they shouted back. "You Anglo-Saxons brought a culture of tolerance and not racism," he declared when finally able to make himself heard. "It's time you learned to uproot the racism, the Kahane margins."

At that same Wingate daylong fair, a settler rabbi allegedly tried to attack the prime minister physically, forcing his way past several of Rabin's bodyguards before he was pushed back. Hostility to Rabin was also evident on Friday afternoons, when a few dozen raucous radicals would gather outside his Ramat Aviv apartment to issue denunciations and condemnations of him, his wife, his government, and his policies. Seeking new ways to express their opposition to the accords, a coalition of five nonparliamentary organizations issued a joint call for a boycott of the nationwide census then taking place.

Against this background, the round-the-clock work to complete the bypass roads continued apace, and the start of the Jenin pullout began slightly ahead of
schedule. On October 25, Israeli police and Civil Administration officials started moving out of Jenin, and the first Palestinian policemen arrived to replace them. At the same time, Israel was maintaining its determined pursuit of the Islamic radicals behind the suicide bombings.

On October 26, in Malta, Fathi Shikaki, the founder and leader of the Islamic Jihad radical movement, was assassinated outside the hotel where he had been staying. Two men roared up on a motorcycle, one got off and shot him dead from close range, remounted, and the bike sped off again. By the time the bike was found abandoned, the pair had disappeared without a trace. Israel made no effort to deny responsibility for the killing of a man who had crowed publicly about having orchestrated several of the suicide bombings. Instead, the security services and army went on high alert, convinced that Shikaki's supporters in the territories would seek to avenge his death with further attacks on Israeli targets.

That assessment proved accurate. On November 2, Islamic Jihad activists in Gaza attempted two bombings—suicide attacks aimed at two school buses traveling between Jewish settlements in the Strip. Quick thinking by the Israeli army jeep escorting the first bus meant that the bomber succeeded only in killing himself, however, and the second bomber was equally unsuccessful, detonating his explosives too far from the second bus to kill anyone but himself.

**A Rally and an Assassination**

Had the bombers succeeded and managed to kill many more Israeli civilians, the fresh fatalities would have provided a somber backdrop for the pro-peace-anti-violence demonstration that Rabin’s supporters had scheduled for Tel Aviv on the following Saturday night, November 4. Given the bombers’ failures, however, that demonstration was convened in an overwhelmingly positive and optimistic atmosphere. Organized by former Tel Aviv mayor Shlomo Lahat and various colleagues, the Tel Aviv rally was designed as a counterpoint to the dozens of right-wing rallies that had become so regular a feature in recent months, aimed at bringing the perceived “silent majority” who favored the peace process out onto the streets and at providing a much needed boost for Rabin himself after the non-stop barrage of insult and invective from the opposition. Rabin had not been a particularly enthusiastic advocate of the rally, regarding it as foolish and unnecessary to match right-wing demonstrations tit-for-tat with left-wing rallies. But the idea of a gathering dedicated to uprooting violence did appeal to him, the more so following his unnerving experiences at the recent Wingate fair and the other worrying signs of right-wing violence.

Several times in interviews in the days leading up to the rally, he spoke of his growing concerns at the level of invective that had become the norm in political debate and of his fears of further “unruly instigation, verbal violence, violence in the street.” Nevertheless, when asked—as he was frequently asked—whether this violence might sooner or later lead to an attempt on the life of a government
politician, he was adamant that such an escalation was out of the question. “I don’t believe a Jew will kill a Jew,” he repeated, waving away concerns for his own safety with the confident assertion that he was “safe in the midst of my people.”

As a man who had built up a gruff, no-nonsense public image, Rabin was widely regarded as being relatively unmoved by the level of opposition to his policies. In fact, though, the constant attacks from the right had battered away at his confidence, to the point where he privately expressed fears to some close colleagues that there simply would not be enough supporters of his policies to fill the Kings of Israel Square where the November 4 rally was taking place. In the event, those fears proved groundless: the square was overflowing with Israelis by the time Rabin arrived to deliver the central address, newspaper estimates subsequently reporting up to 250,000 people present. Rabin’s words reflected his delight at the turnout, beginning with a word of thanks “to each one of you who has come here to make a stand against violence and for peace.”

Taking full advantage of the rare opportunity to deliver his message without heckling or interruption, he spoke of his conviction that Israel now had “a great chance for peace, which must be seized.” Spotting diplomatic envoys from Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco in the VIP seats in front of him, Rabin highlighted his pleasure at seeing “representatives here of countries with which we live in peace,” and went on to praise the PLO, too, “which was an enemy and has now forsaken terrorism.”

As promised, he devoted many of his words to the fear of domestic political violence, declaring, “Violence is undermining the foundations of Israeli democracy. It must be rejected and condemned, and it must be contained.” And he concluded with a rallying cry for the future, a declaration of intent. The rally, he boomed, “must send a message to the Israeli public, to the Jews of the world, to the multitudes in the Arab lands, and to the world at large that the nation of Israel wants peace.”

The speech was rapturously received, and Rabin was evidently delighted by the warmth and enthusiasm of the applause. Utterly uncharacteristically, he publicly embraced Peres, standing beside him on the stage, effectively sealing a partnership that had begun in political rivalry three decades earlier but had blossomed into what Rabin’s chief aide, Eitan Haber, lightly termed “a love affair” as the peace process had gathered pace. If that hug was atypical, so was Rabin’s subsequent agreement to join in with the singing of the rally’s concluding song, the “Song for Peace,” which had become the anthem of the peace movement, with its observation that “the purest prayer will not bring back one whose candle was snuffed out. . . . So sing only a song for peace.” Rabin was not much of a singer, but he did his best to follow along with the words, then carefully folded his song sheet into four and tucked it into his inside jacket pocket.

Peres and Rabin had intended to leave the rally together, and even began walking together to their respective cars, parked in an outdoor lot at the foot of a backstage staircase. But at the last moment, the still exuberant prime minister real-
ized he had not properly thanked the rally's organizers. So he turned back to look for Lahat, and Peres went down the stairs without him. Standing in the shadows to the left of the staircase was Yigal Amir, a 25-year-old from Herzliyah who was bent on assassinating both Rabin and Peres and who had tried to kill Rabin several times in the past. An amateur video film released subsequently showed Peres passing within a few meters of Amir, who could plainly have gunned him down. But Amir elected to hold his fire and await his primary target.

Once Rabin had said a few more goodbyes, he headed back to the exit staircase, wife Leah just behind him, five bodyguards around him. As he descended the last of the 26 stairs and walked the few paces to his waiting Cadillac, Amir stepped out of the shadows, walked two or three quick paces until he was standing right behind the prime minister, pulled a pistol from inside his trousers, and fired three times from point-blank range. Two bullets struck Rabin, a third hit one of the prime minister's bodyguards, Yoram Rubin. Someone, possibly Amir, reportedly screamed out that the bullets were blanks; there was immediate pandemonium.

Rabin half turned toward his assailant, then collapsed by the side of his car. Rubin lifted the prime minister into the Cadillac and screamed at the prime minister's driver, Menachem Damti, to head for the nearest hospital, fast. Amir was forced to the ground by bodyguards and policemen and then back against a nearby wall.

Damti pulled out of the parking lot with a scream of rubber. Uncertain whether Rabin had actually been hit, he asked the prime minister if he was hurt. "Yes, yes," Rabin replied. Asked where the pain was, Rabin murmured, "In my back. It's not so bad." Then he lost consciousness and his head slumped forward.

Scandalously, Damti had not been briefed about the best escape routes, and he was unable to find a direct route to Ichilov Hospital, 700 meters away, because of the mass of people leaving the rally. Instead, he was forced into a circuitous journey, at one point even having to stop when confronted by a police cordon blocking a road. Still more scandalously, when the car finally reached Ichilov, it transpired that none of the prime minister's bodyguards or aides had had the presence of mind to call ahead and warn the hospital that the ailing Rabin was on his way and in urgent need of medical assistance. It was left to Damti, injured bodyguard Rubin, and a startled hospital security guard to lift the prime minister onto a stretcher and take him inside, whence Damti screamed for medical help.

As news of the shooting spread, members of Rabin's family, ministers, diplomats, and close friends converged on the hospital. Surgeons battled to save Rabin's life, but the two bullets had penetrated his lungs. For 50 minutes, the doctors tried every means to revive him. But as hospital director Gabi Barabash said subsequently, the prime minister was dead within nine minutes of arrival.

At around 11 o'clock, Barabash passed the tidings to Leah Rabin and the gathered family and colleagues that Rabin was dead. And Haber went outside the hospital to announce the news to the journalists outside: "With horror, great sor-
row and deep grief, the government of Israel announces the death of Prime Minister and Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, murdered by an assassin.

Aftermath of the Assassination

The killing of the prime minister pushed the country into a state of national mourning—for Rabin personally, for the office he represented, and for the irrevocable loss of national innocence. That half of the electorate that identified with his policies also mourned the loss of their symbol, the man who embodied the hopes of the peace process.

In the days immediately following the assassination, thousands of Israelis physically expressed their sense of bereavement by congregating in the places most associated with the late prime minister—the Kings of Israel Square where he was gunned down, the Rabin family home in Ramat Aviv, the official Prime Minister's Residence in central Jerusalem. On the morning after the murder, Rabin's coffin was placed on an open truck and driven down the main highway from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, to lie in state on a raised bier in the plaza in front of the Knesset. As the convoy proceeded along the 60-kilometer route, drivers halted their cars and stood at attention as a mark of respect. A conspicuously high proportion of young Israelis flocked to these sites, bringing hurriedly improvised banners mourning the loss of "our father Yitzhak" and "our beloved Rabin," lighting memorial candles, and singing, over and over, the words to the "Song for Peace" that Rabin had joined in singing at the climax of the fateful rally. After family, friends, politicians, and other notables filed past the coffin, which was draped in an Israeli flag, an unending procession of Israelis came to say their farewells—streaming slowly past in their tens of thousands, right through that Sunday afternoon, evening, and night, on into Monday morning.

For the Monday funeral in the cemetery on Mt. Herzl, some 80 countries sent representatives, including dozens of heads of state. Jordan's King Hussein made his first visit to Jerusalem since Jordan lost control of the eastern half of the city in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and he spoke movingly at the graveside about having lost a brother and a friend. Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, who had in the past refused repeated invitations from Rabin and other leading politicians to visit Israel, made the short journey, and he too spoke solemnly about the loss of a man of peace and the blow to the peace process. Other Arab states sending representatives included Morocco (the prime minister), Oman (the foreign minister), and Qatar (the information minister)—a gathering that Rabin himself would doubtless have regarded as proof of the growing level of acceptance for Israel in the Arab world. Arafat would doubtless have attended as well, had not Peres and Leah Rabin agreed that his still controversial presence might threaten the sense of solidarity and unity in grief. Instead, Arafat sent a delegation of senior officials to represent him and insured that he was filmed watching the funeral on television in respectful silence in Gaza. Later in the week, amid great secrecy, he paid
a late-night condolence call on Leah Rabin at her home, telling her of his personal anguish at the murder of Rabin, whom he described as a man of integrity and a courageous peace partner.

At the start of the funeral, at 2 P.M., a two-minute siren brought the entire country to a standstill. Then, with a crowd of invited guests watching at the cemetery, and much of the rest of the world watching on TV, President Ezer Weizman delivered the first of 11 eulogies. Other speakers included Russian prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Spanish prime minister Felipe Gonzalez (representing the European Union), and Shimon Sheves (a longtime Rabin aide). Shimon Peres, now installed as acting prime minister, gave a solemn address, promising to safeguard Rabin's legacy by continuing the peace process. Speechwriter Eitan Haber injected a characteristic note of drama, producing that same song sheet from which Rabin had sung the "Song for Peace" and revealing that the crisply folded sheet of paper had been found, now stained with blood, in Rabin's inside jacket pocket as the doctors battled to save his life. "I want to read some of the words from the paper," Haber said tearfully, "but it is difficult for me. Your blood, your blood Yitzhak, covers the printed words. Your blood on the page of the 'Song for Peace.' "

Still more emotional was the speech given by Noa Ben-Artzi, Rabin's 18-year-old granddaughter, who revealed the gentler, grandfatherly side of Rabin that few Israelis had ever dreamed existed behind the blunt exterior. "People greater than I have already eulogized you," she said, "but none of them had my good fortune to feel the caress of your warm, soft hands, and the warm embrace that was just for us. . . . I part from you, a hero, and ask that you rest in peace, that you think about us and miss us. Because we here, down below, love you so much."

Ben-Artzi's address was painful and gripping and underlined the extraordinary impact his death had had on Israeli youth, who seemed to feel the loss more keenly than their elders and who were conspicuous in their large numbers at the various impromptu mourning vigils over the next few days.

The person who had the greatest impact on the stricken, shaken Israeli psyche, however, was the day's final speaker, U.S. president Bill Clinton. In a carefully considered speech that touched on the various assassinations to have clouded American political history, Clinton described Rabin not only as "a martyr for peace" but also as "a victim of hate." The lesson that had to be learned from his death, said the president, was that "if people cannot let go of the hatred of their enemies, they risk sowing the seeds of hatred among themselves. . . . Do not let that happen to you," he exhorted the Israeli public. "Stay the righteous course." America, he promised, would not "forsake you." The unmistakable commitment to Israel that seeped out of every line of the speech made a profound impact on Israelis genuinely concerned for the future of the democracy, and the sense of real friendship implicit in Clinton's remarks added further significance. When the president completed his address with a quiet Hebrew farewell, "Shalom, haver," there was no doubt that he was bidding goodbye to a man he deeply respected
and liked. Picking up on this, in the days following, many Israelis affixed bumper stickers to their cars bearing that same message, "Shalom, haver," their own personal echo of that heartfelt presidential farewell to a friend.

The funeral marked the height of the mourning process, but by no means its end. There were several other ceremonies and gatherings in the coming days; young Israelis camped out at the Rabin home, and Leah often came down to thank them for their support and solidarity, telling them on one occasion that she wished they had been present in the weeks before the assassination, when the only demonstrators were those screaming that her husband was a murderer and that the pair of them would be put to death for their crimes against the Jewish people. Eight days after the killing, Leah addressed another mass gathering in the square, now renamed Yitzhak Rabin Square, at which she spoke as though directly addressing her late husband, telling him of the incredible outpouring of emotion his murder had prompted, of her conviction that the "silent majority" who favored his policies had now been stirred into action, and expressing her confidence that his legacy was safe. She urged Peres to take Israel forward "in the spirit of Yitzhak" toward comprehensive peace. Rabin's fresh grave became a site of pilgrimage, surrounded throughout each day by hundreds of mourners who placed flowers and photographs and flags onto a growing mound of tributes and mementos and lit hundreds and hundreds of memorial candles. At the precise point where Rabin had been gunned down, a modest memorial was erected; it too was rapidly surrounded with piles of flowers and memorial candles. Walls in the square were decorated with paintings of Rabin and messages of hope, despair, and mourning.

Investigation

Along with the mourning came the questions: how had Israel sunk so low as to kill its own prime minister, and how had the highly vaunted Shin Bet security service allowed assassin Amir to carry out his crime with such ease? The latter question was by far the more straightforward to deal with, and it was rapidly addressed both by an immediate internal Shin Bet inquiry and subsequently by a commission headed by former Supreme Court president Meir Shamgar.

Offering Acting Prime Minister Peres his resignation immediately after the assassination, the head of the Shin Bet, Carmi Gillon, readily acknowledged that his agency had been at fault on the night of the killing. But Peres, aware that the Shin Bet had been deeply traumatized by its failure to prevent the assassination, felt that dismissing its chief would only further harm morale. So Gillon agreed to stay on for what both men knew would be only a fairly short period; the Shamgar Commission would inevitably fault him personally with overall responsibility for the agency's inability to safeguard the life of the prime minister. Gillon eventually resigned, on January 7, 1996.

The initial investigation of the killing revealed that the Shin Bet's failure had
been twofold—not only a litany of errors on the night of November 4 but a lamentable lapse in the months beforehand, when Amir should have been identified as a potentially dangerous right-wing extremist. In the first hours after the killing, Amir was described in media reports as a fairly unremarkable 25-year-old man from Herzliyah, the second-oldest of eight brothers and sisters, a third-year law student at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, and a graduate of the combined army-yeshivah study Hesder program. A little more digging, however, revealed that Amir was a well-known activist on the far right, a friend of known extremists who congregated at Bar-Ilan’s own campus kolel Jewish study center, and an organizer of regular weekends in the West Bank and Gaza at which dozens or even hundreds of pro-settlement activists would spend a Sabbath at a Jewish settlement to show solidarity with the settlers and demonstrate their opposition to the phased West Bank and Gaza land handover. A picture was unearthed showing Amir spearheading a small demonstration outside the Ashkelon home of Knesset member Alex Goldfarb, just prior to the Knesset vote on Oslo in which Goldfarb played so crucial a part, urging Goldfarb to vote against the accord. Amir was discovered to have participated in a summer 1995 campaign, organized by settlers from Efrat in the West Bank, of passive resistance to army evacuation from a new neighborhood being illegally constructed on a hilltop at the settlement’s edge. And he was found to be one of 800 army reservists to have signed a declaration refusing to participate in the Oslo II West Bank redeployment.

Such activities marked Amir as an unusually energetic and committed right-wing activist, but not necessarily as a security threat. However, in the first days and weeks after the killing, it quickly became evident that signs of his potential for violence had also been discernible, if only the security services had been looking. Fellow students of Amir’s at Bar-Ilan University acknowledged that he had often discussed with them the need to assassinate Rabin and Peres, arguing that, as the leaders who were turning over land divinely promised to the Jews in the Bible, they merited the death penalty under Jewish law. Nor were these friends revealing this information for the first time. At least one of them had made certain that a warning was passed on months before the killing. This university friend, Hila Frank, was sufficiently alarmed and disturbed to hear Amir talking about the obligation to eliminate Rabin that she discussed the issue with another of their mutual friends, Shlomo Halevy. They agreed that Amir might just be full of hot air, that he might have no actual intention of turning words into deeds, but they also felt it would be irresponsible not to alert the security services to the potential danger.

Concerned not to directly implicate Amir, Halevy went to the police in Jerusalem with an invented story. He told them that he had been in a bathroom at Tel Aviv’s central bus station when, quite by chance, he overheard two men discussing the need to assassinate the prime minister. He said he had caught a glimpse of the man who was talking about carrying out the deed himself and gave a description that matched Amir—short, Yemenite, thin, black skullcap on his
head. Halevy added that he had also learned from the conversation that the man was a law student at Bar-Ilan University. Subsequently, Halevy was to say that he was certain he had given the police ample information to identify Amir, and that when no action was taken against Amir, he felt a sense of relief—assuming that his information had been checked out and Amir found not to constitute a threat. In fact, though, the police passed on the details of Halevy's evidence to the Shin Bet, which made an effort to track down the alleged assassin-in-waiting but failed to identify Amir. The report was therefore filed away and forgotten, until after November 4.

What was particularly galling about the Shin Bet failure was the revelation that the agency had had another source of information pointing to the Amir threat. Taking testimony in the weeks after the assassination, the Shamgar Commission established that Avishai Raviv—who headed an extremist movement called Eyal, studied at Bar-Ilan, and was an associate of Amir's—was in the employ of the Shin Bet. Several months prior to the assassination, he was commissioned by his bosses to prepare a report on Amir, in which he noted Amir's potential for violence. By all accounts, the report was rather vague and ambiguous, but had it been married with Halevy's tip-off, it is inconceivable that it would not have led to closer monitoring of Amir's activities.

The security breakdown on the night of the assassination itself, November 4, however, was even more reprehensible than the intelligence breakdown in the months beforehand.

The security services had received information indicating a possibility of Islamic Jihad or other Palestinian Islamic extremist attacks on Rabin, Peres, or other targets at the rally—to avenge the assassination in Malta nine days earlier of Islamic Jihad founder and operational chief Fathi Shikaki (see above). Thus, security briefings prior to the rally all focused on the potential Islamic extremist threat; the notion of a right-wing Jewish attack on a political figure was not seriously addressed. In a sense, the security services were mirroring Rabin's own oft-stated confidence that no Jew would sink so low as to attack him. But whereas, in his case, it was natural to expect a high standard of behavior from his countryfolk, for the security services it should have been a rudimentary professional imperative to prepare for the worst, to take the necessary precautions should Rabin's sunny assessment prove inaccurate.

It was the complacency over the Jewish threat that enabled Amir to carry out his crime so easily. He had tried on previous occasions to assassinate Rabin, and had failed because he arrived late at gatherings where Rabin had been present or because he had no invitation to events closed to the public. He fully expected to fail this time as well, and subsequently would tell investigators that even if he got close enough to the prime minister to shoot him, he had made no escape plans and fully expected to give his life in the effort to end Rabin's.

In fact, though, he encountered no difficulty whatsoever in carrying out his murderous mission. Amateur film of the parking lot where Rabin's car awaited
him at the end of the rally showed Amir loitering unnoticed in what should have been a top-security zone—allowed to remain there by policemen and intelligence officials because he was obviously Jewish and thus not perceived as a threat. He sat on a planter at one point; chatted with two young policemen at another. When Peres came down the stairs to the parking lot, a short time ahead of Rabin, the film shows Amir watching him impassively from the shadows, holding his fire. Peres shook hands over a barrier with a few well-wishers, then drove away. When Rabin came down the stairs, he was accompanied by five bodyguards, but the one guarding his back turned around as Rabin neared his car—according to some reporters, he was asked by Rabin himself to find out why Leah was lagging behind. Amir darted into the space he left exposed, approached within inches of Rabin, and fired.

Completing the succession of security-service inadequacies, agents on the ground failed to protect Leah when the shots rang out, failed to call ahead to Ichilov Hospital to report that Rabin was on his way, failed even to ascertain whether Rabin had been hit or whether, as somebody, possibly Amir, shouted, the bullets were blanks.

The police and security agents on hand did at least manage to apprehend Amir, who was first forced to the ground and disarmed, then marched back against a wall, with one policeman holding an arm firmly across his throat. Under questioning, as Rabin was fighting for his life, Amir readily confessed to having fired the shots, asserting that his purpose had been "to save the state" and that "he who endangers the Jewish people, his end is death. He deserved to die, and I did the job for the Jewish people." When told that Rabin had passed away, he expressed satisfaction and no remorse.

The Assassin

Yigal Amir was no insane lunatic, emerging from out of nowhere to carry out a killing that his countryfolk could neither have predicted nor understood. He was, rather, a product of a solid family and educational background who had completed the highly vaunted Hesder army-yeshivah program and whose act of extremism was, although reviled by the overwhelming majority of Israelis, understood by them. Moreover his motivation found at least faint echoes of empathy among many in the huge mass of Israelis who felt the peace process with the Palestinians to be a dangerous mistake.

Questioned for a full month before murder charges were filed against him on December 5, Amir was content to take full responsibility for his deed and used the opportunity afforded by his court hearings to explain his reasoning to journalists and the judge. Repeating the arguments he had made to university friends before the killing, he asserted that the Rabin government was illegitimate, since it was supported by Arab votes. He asserted that the peace process was dangerous, since Arafat could not be trusted to insure Israeli security, and since the im-
minent Israeli army West Bank withdrawal would deprive settlers of army protection and make sovereign Israelis increasingly vulnerable to Palestinians now receiving arms by the thousands courtesy of Israel. And most emphatically he insisted that relinquishing West Bank land to the Palestinians was un-Jewish, a secular government's blasphemous betrayal of the divine will. Had Israel been run according to the precepts of Jewish religious law, Halakhah, he declared, Rabin and his government would have merited the death penalty under the concepts of "din rodef" and/or "din moser" — as an assailant or betrayer of his people. Since there was no rabbinical Sanhedrin empowered to pass sentence, Amir had taken the responsibility upon himself, serving as judge, jury, and executioner.

In one typical exchange with Tel Aviv district court judge Dan Arbel, Amir declared, "According to religious law, when a Jew gives up his land and his people to the enemy, one is obliged to kill him."

Arbel: "But in the Ten Commandments, it says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' Where have you thrown the Ten Commandments?"

Amir: "The Ten Commandments haven't been abolished. In the Torah, there are 613 commandments. There are commandments more important than 'Thou shalt not kill.' There is 'The Saving of Life.' If someone goes to kill another person, you are duty-bound to kill the attacker first."

Far from indicating regret, Amir insisted confidently that he had done the right thing and asserted that he would have no hesitation in doing it again. His demeanor in court was cocky and nonchalant; he sat calmly, chewing gum, smiling often, and even waving and blowing kisses when he caught the attention of his parents, Shlomo and Ge'ulah, sitting in the small public gallery. Ge'ulah, immediately after the killing, had given tearful television interviews expressing her shame and sorrow that a son of hers could have carried out such an action and had begged Leah Rabin for forgiveness. Still she was a regular presence in the courtroom, and she never criticized her oldest son, Hagai, who was indicted on co-conspiracy charges, as was a third man, Dror Adani.

The case against Amir and his alleged accomplices unfolded in two trials. Amir himself was charged with murder and with wounding Rabin's bodyguard, Yoram Rubin, who had taken the third bullet in the shoulder. Along with Hagai and Adani, he was also indicted on charges of conspiracy and possession of illegal weapons.

According to the indictments and the testimony heard in court, the Amir brothers and Adani had planned the killing for months, discussing all manner of options for eliminating Rabin. These ranged from placing a remote-control roadside bomb along a route they knew he would be taking to pouring nitroglycerine into the pipes at the Rabins' apartment, in the hope of inducing an explosion. Hagai, a trained sniper, had tried to obtain an M-16 rifle from the army with the idea of shooting Rabin as he entered or left his home, and had even obtained a customized silencer for the purpose — but the army had refused to issue the gun.

Since all these schemes came to naught, Amir elected to carry out the crime in
the most direct way possible, simply by approaching the prime minister and shooting him from point-blank range. To that end, Amir attended several events at which Rabin was scheduled to appear, but always managed to miss him. The court was told that he and Hagai then discussed the possibility of assassinating Rabin at the November 4 rally, and that Hagai strongly counseled against any such attempt, anticipating unusually tight security. Nevertheless, Amir elected to go ahead.

Much of Amir’s investigation and a good deal of the trial were devoted to the question of whether the killer had sought or obtained official rabbinical sanction to carry out the crime. Days after the killing, in an emotional address to a post-assassination gathering of modern Orthodox leaders, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, a rabbi from the West Bank settlement of Ofra, publicly alleged that he knew of several rabbis who had discussed the need to kill the prime minister and had given either tacit or actual sanction for the killing. If they did not voluntarily make themselves known and resign any state-funded positions they held, he vowed, he would publicly name and shame them. No such rabbis came forward, however, and Bin-Nun named no names publicly, instead meeting privately with Israel’s two chief rabbis, apparently to pass on his information. Several rabbis—some prominent in the settlement movement, in the Hesder system, and in schools and yeshivot where Amir had studied—were interviewed by the chief rabbis and/or questioned by Israel police. But no charges were ever issued, and the attorney-general eventually declared that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute.

Newspaper reports of police investigations quoted Adani as saying that he had tried but failed to find a rabbi willing to sanction the killing. However, Hagai, along with another Bar-Ilan student questioned by police, Margalit Har-Shefi, reportedly admitted that they had obtained a rabbi’s sanction, but refused to name the rabbi involved. In court, Amir refused to answer the question directly, insisting only that he had acted alone, “and maybe God worked with me.”

The murder trial stretched on into 1996, finally coming to its conclusion in late March. Amir had gone through a succession of lawyers, including one, Jonathan Ray Goldberg, whose lack of mastery of Hebrew caused frequent and inappropriate hilarity in the courtroom. State-appointed lawyers came and went, and the defense failed to formulate a coherent strategy. It took the judge to suggest that it might be worth examining Amir’s mental state, to see whether he had understood his actions and was fit to stand trial; court-appointed psychiatrists did pronounce him so fit. Only toward the end of the trial did some kind of defense emerge, to the effect that, while Amir had intended to stop Rabin carrying out his policies, he had not intended to kill him. To have paralyzed him would have been sufficient, and that was why the bullets were fired into the back rather than the skull. However, this defense was undermined by Amir’s own statements to investigators and in court to the effect that he had planned the killing well in advance and was satisfied to have carried it out successfully.

The aim of the “paralysis” defense was to avoid the mandatory sentence for
murder. But on March 27, the three-judge panel of the Tel Aviv District Court unanimously found Amir guilty of murder and of wounding bodyguard Rubin. The judges sentenced him to life imprisonment for the first crime and a further six-year term for the second. Dismissing the various defense arguments, the court said it was convicting Amir on the basis of overwhelming evidence, including his own testimony in court and to investigators, the reenactment of the crime he had carried out for the benefit of police and investigators several days after the murder, the amateur film of the actual murder taken from a nearby rooftop, other eyewitness testimony, and medical, ballistic, and unspecified other evidence. The court vehemently rejected Amir's efforts to bring Jewish legal justification for the crime. "The attempt to give a halakhic seal of approval to the murder of Yitzhak Rabin," the judges stated in their verdict, "was out of place and constitutes a cynical and disgraceful use of Halakhah for purposes alien to Judaism."

Even at this stage, Amir expressed no regret for his action, saying in a final statement to the court, "Everything I did, I did for Israel, for the people of Israel, for the land of Israel. . . . The damage that would have been done to Israel had I not done what I did would have been irreversible."

Commission Report

The day after the verdict was handed down, the Shamgar Commission issued its report, although some sections of it, relating to the Shin Bet, were not published. The report was unremittingly critical of the Shin Bet, noting that the agency had considerable evidence of the right-wing threat to Rabin but failed to address it properly. It noted that the exchange of information between various departments was flawed, and it criticized security arrangements on the night of the rally. It noted approvingly that Shin Bet chief Gillon and another high-ranking official code-named Daled Yud had already resigned and recommended that other senior officials leave the service or be taken out of positions of authority.

The Shamgar Commission also dismissed the welter of conspiracy theories that had sprung up around the assassination—talk of Shin Bet involvement in the crime, of Amir having been deliberately "set up" to carry out the killing, or of one of Rabin's own bodyguards somehow having been involved, and more. There was no basis to any of these claims, the commission found, merely an appalling and inexcusable series of security lapses that had enabled the assassin to strike with relative ease.

Trying to Recover

The modern Orthodox sector, and the Hesder army-yeshivah program in particular, were badly stigmatized by the killing. This was not merely because Amir was a product of that world; there was also published evidence that some rab-
binical leaders had been giving considerable thought to the question of whether, purely theoretically of course, Rabin might have merited punishment under Jewish law.

Soon after the killing, for example, Israeli newspapers published the text of the letter written by Kiryat Arba rabbi Dov Lior and two other settler rabbis, early in 1995, to several dozen leading rabbinical figures worldwide (see above). The letter reportedly produced few responses, and the subject was dropped, but clearly it was on the agenda. Lior was one of the rabbis called in by police for questioning, but he adamantly denied issuing any kind of ruling sanctioning murder. Another rabbi questioned was Nahum Rabinovitch, head of the Hesder yeshivah at Ma’aleh Adumim, who also firmly denied sanctioning the assassination.

Many Orthodox rabbis, Rabinovitch and Lior included, issued emotional statements condemning the killing, but these individual comments did not make much impact on the secular, mainstream Israeli media, and the modern Orthodox sector as a whole appeared on the defensive. At a Jerusalem gathering in the week after the killing, Rabbi Haim Druckman, a leading figure in the Hesder movement, declared almost desperately, “We are not guilty. . . . We educated according to true values.” Most speakers called for soul-searching on the part of religious and secular Jews alike, right-wingers and left, to insure that internal opposition could never again lead to such a crime. But one or two speakers at the same event gave critics of the Orthodox new ammunition. The settler rabbi Menahem Felix, for example, issued a new stream of antigovernment invective: “We must continue to oppose the government, which rests on support from the haters of Israel,” he declared, referring to the coalition’s dependence for its Knesset majority on the support of Arab Knesset members — one of the very arguments employed by Amir. “I don’t think we have to retract one truth, that the land of Israel is ours, and giving it up will bring destruction.”

Calls for “soul-searching” were heard across the political and religious spectrum in the weeks after the killing, but Orthodox leaders argued that it seemed to be they and they alone who were expected to do the soul-searching. Along with right-wing political leaders, they were soon alleging that they were being made the object of a left-wing, secular “witch-hunt” — blamed en masse for the assassination. The sense of grievance this produced and the rift it opened between secular and religious Israelis would find expression in the voting patterns manifested in the coming general elections.

The Political Fallout

As soon as Rabin was pronounced dead at Ichilov Hospital, an emergency cabinet meeting was called. Gathering at the nearby Defense Ministry complex, ministers of the Rabin coalition unanimously selected Shimon Peres to fill the role of acting prime minister. Some ministers were in tears as they stood in silence to honor Rabin. When Peres came out afterward to meet the crowd of international
journalists, he stood in front of a photograph showing Rabin and King Hussein sharing a friendly cigarette together, and fervently pledged to guard Rabin's legacy by continuing the peace policies he advocated.

That task was made immeasurably easier by the huge swing in Israeli public support behind the peace process in the immediate aftermath of the assassination. It was as though a large percentage of Israelis were suddenly willing to put aside skepticism about the viability of the accords, if only to distance themselves from the right-wing opposition stained by the killing. An opinion poll taken in the week after the killing, for example, showed a staggering 74 percent of Israelis now backing the autonomy program—a higher rating than at any point in the process. Polls at the same time showed Peres surpassing opposition leader Netanyahu by 30 percent or more, and Peres was endorsed overwhelmingly by Labor as the party's choice to lead it into the forthcoming elections.

There were several Labor leaders who would have mounted a leadership challenge in different circumstances— Histadrut chief Haim Ramon and former chief of staff Ehud Barak, to name but two. But the feeling was that Peres was the only man to take up the baton from Rabin, and that his hitherto inglorious election record—he failed to win outright in 1977, 1981, 1984, and 1988—would now be viewed as irrelevant. The next elections were to be fought under a new, two-ballot system—one ballot to directly elect the prime minister, the second to pick the voter's party of choice—which made the contest for prime minister a personal one. Peres had never been popular, but there is little doubt that, had Peres chosen to go the country at this time, right after the assassination, he would have prevailed easily, winning a huge post-Rabin "sympathy" vote. His rival, Netanyahu, was reeling. He had been heavily criticized by Leah Rabin and others for failing to distance himself sufficiently from the extremists who attended his anti-Oslo rallies, and there was much muttering in the Likud about him being an "empty vessel"—fine for issuing slogans and short TV sound bites, but lacking in substance.

Acting on the advice of his close aide, Uri Savir, director-general of the Foreign Ministry, and others, Peres chose not to take the obvious course—calling elections on the ground that he needed his own mandate from the people to govern. For one thing, he apparently felt a political duty to spare Israel the instability and inevitable further in-fighting of an election campaign. For another, he reasoned that the next phases of the Oslo accords—the central matter of government business—had already received Knesset approval. He merely had to implement them. Accordingly, Peres merely reshuffled his cabinet a little and went to work.

Ramon, who had defected from Labor in 1994 to win a dramatic upset victory for election as secretary-general of the Histadrut labor federation, returned to Labor ranks and was immediately installed as minister of the interior. Yossi Beilin, Peres's closest political confidant and his deputy at the Foreign Ministry, was given cabinet rank as a minister without portfolio, responsible for the peace process, working out of the Prime Minister's Office. The most significant sym-
bolic appointment was that of Rabbi Yehuda Amital, the head of the Har Etzion Yeshivah in the West Bank, as a minister without portfolio, brought in to serve as a conduit between the government and the disaffected leaders of the settlement movement, the harshest critics of the Oslo accords. Amital was hardly a typical settler rabbi, however. (If he had been, he would never have joined the cabinet.) In fact, he was one of the few prominent religious Zionist rabbis who firmly backed the peace process, arguing strongly in support of territorial compromise on the ground that the lives of the people in Israel took precedence over the Torah and the actual Land of Israel.

Amital's cooption underlined the differences between Rabin and Peres: the former, a general even after half a lifetime in politics, shrugged off settler criticism and anger, apparently confident that he was leading his country in the right direction, from the front, and feeling that the grumbling in the ranks would eventually die out; the latter, by contrast, sought to appease his critics and, failing that, at least to address them. Amital, however, made little impact in the Peres government; he was liked but not taken particularly seriously.

Of more practical significance was the appointment of Ehud Barak as the new foreign minister (moving over from interior), or, more accurately, the failure to appoint Barak as defense minister. Ignoring advice from aides and political analysts, Peres chose to serve as both prime minister and defense minister, as had Rabin, believing that a grasp of both these portfolios was essential to the proper steering of the peace process. The danger in such a move was that, were the suicide bombers of Hamas and Islamic Jihad to launch a new campaign of violence, Peres would have to take full personal responsibility. Had he named Barak as his defense minister, he would have been able to transfer some of the blame and to argue that, if the ex-chief of staff could not stop the bombers, then who could? Like his decision not to call early elections, this was a major miscalculation that would come back to haunt Peres in the months ahead.

Adopting the most statesmanlike tone, to insure no further criticisms, Netanyahu pledged to make no political capital from the assassination. He issued a ringing denunciation of extremism and said he did not wish for the votes of the radicals whom he had previously allowed to hijack his demonstrations. He even smoothed the path for Peres's new government to gain Knesset approval, recommending Peres to President Weizman in the formal consultations stipulated by law as the man most suited to form the next government. "In democracies," Netanyahu noted, "power is transferred through elections, not murder." Netanyahu also held a meeting with Peres to work out a new code of political behavior, with an understanding that disputes would be handled from now on "within the bounds of restraint and civility." This marked a recognition that the vitriolic nature of Knesset debates had often set the tone for the raucous demonstrations in the streets.

The political echelons had clearly learned a lesson from the assassination, and Knesset behavior in subsequent months was indeed markedly more restrained and
responsible than had been the norm. Street-level protests were also calmer; some protest movements suspended their activities for several months. Sadly, though, the real extremists were not entirely cowed. Within hours of the assassination, fresh graffiti were daubed on Jerusalem walls warning that “Peres is next”; anonymous phone calls to the same effect were received by radio stations, at the Prime Minister's Office, and elsewhere in the weeks that followed. The killing was publicly celebrated among some Kach activists, and the potential for more violence was highlighted by incidents such as the dispatch, through the Knesset's internal mail system, of a bullet enclosed in a letter to left-wing communications minister Shulamit Aloni, with the stark message: “Your place is in the heavens.”

Redoubling their efforts in the light of past failure, the security authorities cracked down on known right-wing extremists: excluding some American activists from the country, enforcing restriction-of-movement orders with greater force, and issuing dozens of indictments for long-forgotten alleged minor infringements. The complement of personal bodyguards around Peres and other ministers was greatly reinforced: every prime ministerial visit became a nightmare for anyone living or working in the vicinity, with advance security details descending on the area, clearing roads, and evacuating buildings. Peres was ordered to wear a bullet-proof vest on several occasions.

While some commentators called all this an overreaction, Attorney-General Michael Ben-Yair insisted, a week after the killing, that “a psychological barrier” had now been removed “among that part of the public that has developed an extreme, fanatical and dangerous world view. And this will facilitate another murder. For these people the assassination constitutes a success. Therefore there is a certainty not just a likelihood of another assassination.”

Implementing Oslo II; Palestinian Elections

Had Rabin still been alive, it is almost certain that the implementation of the Oslo II accord in November and December would have been met with prolonged and intense antigovernment demonstrations and vitriolic criticism. In the hushed climate after the killing, however, the Israeli redeployment passed almost unnoticed.

The first town to be handed over to Arafat's control was Jenin, from which the last Israeli soldiers withdrew on November 13, a few days ahead of schedule. On November 19, Arafat flew from Gaza to address residents of the city, who cheered him enthusiastically when he recalled that he had been a Fatah commander there in 1967, before being forced to flee to Jordan. Later the same month, soldiers began leaving Tulkarm, completing the pullout on December 10. The very next day, the last soldiers left Nablus, and the redeployment from Qalqilya was completed on December 16.

The withdrawal from these cities went relatively smoothly, with a lead delegation of Arafat's police forces first meeting with the Israeli army's senior officials
in each town to discuss the procedures for a transfer of power and a gradual departure of Israeli forces and arrival of their Palestinian replacements. Only in Nablus was the handover rather less calm; the departing troops were jostled and stoned, and a forgotten Israeli flag was burned with delight by revelers at the local military headquarters building. The Bethlehem withdrawal was completed just prior to Christmas, enabling Arafat to make a triumphant return for the first “Palestinian Christmas.” And the pullout from Ramallah, which completed the series of redeployments, now left Hebron as the only major West Bank city still under Israeli control. Although Arafat had initially called for its handover prior to Palestinian elections, he ultimately agreed to the Hebron redeployment taking place in March, with the elections to be held on January 20.

Preparation for the elections was marked by predictions of chaos in the local and international press, with the suggestion that the Palestinians were not properly prepared, that officials were working from incomplete or inaccurate voting registers, that Hamas, having decided not to participate, would seek to torpedo the vote, and so on. In the event, however, the election process was relatively successful, if not altogether democratic.

Some 650 people stood as candidates for the 88-member Palestinian self-rule council, each collecting the requisite 500 signatures and paying a $1,000 fee. Only two people registered as presidential candidates — collecting 5,000 signatures apiece and paying a $3,000 fee — Arafat and a 72-year-old al-Birah social worker, activist, and mother-of-five, Samiha Khalil. Khalil’s candidacy was given little publicity in the Arafat-controlled Palestinian media; nor was she a serious candidate, telling an opening press conference that she would seek to cancel the Oslo accords, then contradicting herself the next day. Nevertheless, her candidacy added an impression of democracy to the process, which must have pleased Arafat, who in any case emerged victorious with some 90 percent of the vote. The PLO chairman also did his best to insure, with considerable success, that his own loyalists fared well in the battle for council seats, redrawing various district boundaries and changing the seat allocations in various voting districts to maximize his supporters’ chances. He also overruled the results of internal Fatah primaries and arbitrarily decided which candidates he wanted to run on the Fatah ticket.

Such behavior incurred the wrath of the international election observers, led by former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, but Carter reserved most of his criticisms for election day itself, and for Israel, complaining that the army had deliberately placed huge contingents of police and border police outside East Jerusalem polling booths to deter local Arabs from voting. The behavior of the observers was itself hardly beyond reproach, however; the polling stations had barely closed before Carter was declaring the elections fair and democratic and heading back home, neglecting to stay around for the vote count. Bizarre counting procedures led to days of confusion over who exactly had won election, with some candidates first being told they had won a seat, then later learning they had failed to win representation. When the dust had settled, it was clear that Arafat had managed
to fill the council chamber with acolytes. Only a handful of real opposition politicians—including the former peace negotiators Haider Abdel Shafi and Hanan Ashrawi, and the Hamas-linked Imad Falouji—would be there to make even a token effort to obstruct his continued single-handed domination of all Palestinian affairs.

Although the period around the military withdrawal and the elections was marked by relative calm in Israeli-Palestinian tensions, there were some incidents of violence, particularly in the wake of the January 5 killing in Gaza of Hamas's chief bomb-maker, Yihya Ayash, "the engineer." Ayash, who headed the Israeli most-wanted list for several years, died when a booby-trapped mobile phone he was using exploded, blowing his head off. The phone had been supplied by a relative, reportedly in the pay of the Shin Bet, who prudently fled the country shortly before the killing. In a revenge action on January 16, a hitherto unknown organization called the Mujahedin al-Islam claimed responsibility for the drive-by killing of Israeli army doctor Oz Tibon and medic Yaniv Shimmel, shot dead in their car on the road between Hebron and Bethlehem. And on January 20, a soldier was stabbed to death by a Hamas member who managed to evade the metal detector at the entrance to the Israeli-Palestinian liaison office in Jenin.

**Peres Advances Elections; Bombings Resume**

Still, Peres's sense that the peace process was basically unfolding well, and the absence of suicide bombings, persuaded him now to call elections—to advance voting from the scheduled date at the end of October to May 29. Announcing his decision on TV on February 11, Peres insisted that, far from exploiting the Rabin assassination, he had deliberately waited until the shock waves subsided, but was seeking his own mandate to govern now that the country was back on its feet. At once, his own Labor Party and the opposition Likud began gearing up for party primaries—to choose the candidates for their Knesset slates. But the race looked certain to be one-sided; Peres was still far ahead in the polls, Netanyahu still limping behind, still stained by association with the Rabin killing, still attracting criticism of his leadership from within the Likud.

No sooner had the early election date been set, however, than the Hamas-Islamic Jihad suicide bombings resumed with a terrible ferocity. In purported revenge actions for the Ayash killing, two suicide bombers carried out attacks on February 25. The first took place in Jerusalem early on a Sunday morning. The bomber boarded a packed No. 18 city bus and blew it up not far from the capital's central bus station. Twenty-four people were killed, and more than 70 injured. Less than an hour later, the second bomber struck at a crossroads in Ashkelon to the south, killing another Israeli and injuring several dozen more.

The Peres government responded by urging Arafat to make more of an effort to confront the Hamas radicals. Chief of Staff Amnon Shahak held an emergency meeting with Arafat on the Israel-Gaza border, giving him a list of alleged Hamas
activists wanted on suspicion of involvement in orchestrating attacks, with details of their hideouts. Shahak demanded that Arafat track them down, arrest them, and hand them over to Israel for trial. As the commentators had predicted, Peres, prime minister and defense minister, bore the brunt of criticism along with Arafat; there was talk of Peres having recklessly lifted a stringent closure order on Gaza and the West Bank shortly before the bombings, and much attention was drawn to the fact that previous such bombings had also occurred soon after closure orders were lifted. The closure had been imposed on February 13, to coincide with the end of a 40-day mourning period for Ayash.

Before Israel had recovered from these twin bombings, the Islamic extremists went on the attack twice more. On March 3, exactly a week after the last blast, they struck again, again in Jerusalem, again on bus No. 18, as though mocking the increased security precautions introduced in previous days. Again the bus was blown up on Jaffa Road, this time in the heart of the city, this time with the loss of 20 lives. And the very next day, before all these latest victims had even been laid to rest, the bombers hit yet a fourth time—a suicide bomber detonating the explosives he was carrying outside the Dizengoff Center shopping mall in central Tel Aviv, killing 13 people who happened to be crossing the street or standing close to him.

Only now did Arafat go into action against Hamas, beginning to arrest some of the key activists on the Israeli list and dozens more besides, and outlawing the Hamas military wing, Izzedin al-Qassam, the Qassam Brigades. He later reportedly explained that Hamas had assured him that the February 25th blasts were a one-time act of revenge for Ayash's killing, and that there would be no further attacks, trying to present himself as a man who had been betrayed.

But many Israelis were by now uninterested in Arafat's calculations or feelings. The February and March bombings consigned the Rabin killing and the renewed support it brought for the peace process to history, re-igniting all the old doubts about the viability of the process and the trustworthiness of Arafat and sending Peres's position in the opinion polls crashing, turning a one-horse election race into a real contest. The blasts appeared to make a mockery of Peres's idealistic talk of a new Middle East and allowed the opposition to close in on his long-perceived weakness: his lack of security credentials. "Where is Peres's new Middle East now?" Netanyahu wondered in a TV interview. "All we can see is the old Middle East of bombs and bullets." Added another Likud Knesset member, Uzi Landau, "The Oslo concept blew up with the Hamas bombings."

Peres went to the scene of each of the blasts, against the advice of the security services, enduring taunts and jeers of anger and derision from a noticeably smaller number of bystanders than had gathered at similar blasts in previous months. While some ministers called for the immediate erection of a fence between Israel and the West Bank to thwart further blasts, and others called for elite troops to be dispatched to Hamas strongholds to take on Hamas, Peres instead reiterated his commitment to the peace process while simultaneously intensifying the fight
against terrorism. He placed the main Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank under virtual blockades, closely controlling everything going in and out; he flooded major Israeli cities with extra police and soldiers, in a bid to prevent more attacks; he targeted Hamas activists in those parts of the West Bank still under Israeli control; he ordered the demolition of homes of the families of the suicide bombers; he urged the international community to act against Hamas and its fund-raising arms in their countries; he urged the United States and other countries to join Israel in pressing Arafat to act against Hamas; and he initiated an international antiterrorism summit conference in the Egyptian tourist resort of Sharm al-Sheikh, co-hosted by Presidents Mubarak and Clinton.

In common with Arafat, and echoing Rabin, Peres cited Iran as the source of the suicide bombings, the ideological and financial support base for Hamas. "This terrorism . . . has an infrastructure. It has networks camouflaged as charity organizations," he said at the Sharm al-Sheikh conference in March. "It is spearheaded by a country: Iran. A conclusion must be drawn on how to contain it." Clinton, whose presence at the conference was a clear indication of personal support for Peres and part of a fairly obvious effort by his administration to show to Israeli voters that its preference in the elections was for the incumbent over the challenger, described the latest bombings as the "desperate" and "depraved" acts of enemies of peace who could see new milestones being passed on the road to reconciliation. "We will win the battle for peace," he declared.

All was not lost for Peres, but the blasts had badly weakened him in the run-up to the elections. A poll published after the Dizengoff Center blast showed 60 percent of Israelis still backing the peace process; the question was whether a majority of the public still wanted Peres to lead it. The public mood had darkened; people were afraid to take buses, afraid to go to movie theaters, afraid, in short, to congregate anywhere in large and vulnerable numbers.

In this climate, the issue of the PLO Covenant, or Charter, took on increased symbolic importance. The cancellation or large-scale amendment of the PLO's three-decade-old guiding document, with its advocacy of the "armed struggle" to liberate Palestine from Zionist rule, had been a condition of the Israeli-PLO peace process since its origins in 1993. But only with the signing of the Oslo II accords in September 1995 was a fixed timetable for the change agreed to. Arafat was obligated to convene the Palestine National Council (PNC), the 600-plus-member Palestinian parliament-in-exile, which was the only body empowered to alter the covenant, within two months of the first meeting of the newly elected Palestinian Council in Gaza, and to insure that the necessary changes were voted upon.

In early February, the Peres government made clear that it would not refuse entry to any members of the PNC who wanted to come to Gaza to participate in the debate and vote on the charter, even if they were hard-line Palestinian terrorists. When Naif Hawatmeh, the leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, indicated in February that he was contemplating coming to
Gaza for the PNC sessions, for example, Peres made clear that he would be allowed in, despite his organization's responsibility for the 1974 attack on a school in Ma'alot that left 25 Israelis dead, and other attacks.

The newly elected Palestinian Council, headed by Arafat, held its first meeting on March 7; the clock was now ticking. If by May 7 the Palestinians had not resolved the charter issue, they would be in clear breach of the Oslo accords— with definite negative implications for Peres's chances in the Israeli elections on May 29.

Candidates and Primaries

Even though the four bombings had dealt a grievous blow to Peres's election chances, opposition leader Netanyahu was not relying only on outside events to boost his victory chances. With the aid of Ariel Sharon, who withdrew his own candidacy for the top spot, in February and March he secured two deals that immeasurably improved his prospects for winning the prime-ministerial race, eliminating the two other serious right-wing contenders. First, in a move that caught even leading Likud party figures by surprise, he agreed to an alliance with ex-chief of staff Rafael Eitan's Tsomet party, under the terms of which Eitan withdrew his prime-ministerial candidacy in return for the number two spot on a joint Likud-Tsomet Knesset list and seven other spots for his loyalists in the first 42 places on the slate. "Rafual" had never been a particular fan of Netanyahu's, but the deal represented political pragmatism, appearing to insure a strong Tsomet presence in the next Knesset for a small price—the withdrawal of a candidacy that had no chance of success in any case.

Netanyahu's next deal, though now logical, was the more remarkable. In a series of moves, he wooed back his most bitter rival and critic, David Levy, who had set up his own Gesher splinter party, getting him to join what now became a three-way alliance with the Likud and Tsomet; persuaded Eitan to slip down to the number three spot on the joint slate; gave Gesher's candidates guaranteed slots on the joint slate; and won Levy's pledge to withdraw his prime-ministerial candidacy. Many leading and middle-ranking Likud members were angered by the two deals, since the joint list meant that Likud party candidates had a greatly reduced chance of winning seats in the Knesset. But Netanyahu was clearly going for broke; it was now a straight race between him and Peres for the prime ministership, with no other divisive right-wing candidates. If he could pull off his gamble and defeat Peres, the internal Likud mutterings would be forgotten; if he failed, his career would likely come to a shuddering halt in any case, so he was prepared to risk everything.

Fully aware now that the election would be a tight one, both major parties held their primaries at the end of March—choosing and ranking the members of their forthcoming Knesset slates. (Leaders Peres and Netanyahu did not run in the primaries, having already established their positions at the head of their respective party lists.) The March 25 Labor poll resulted in a surprise victory for Uzi Baram,
the minister of tourism, whose evident popularity with Labor members stemmed in good part from the fact that he had no real enemies in the party ranks and thus was widely supported by all loyalists. Baram was followed by Ehud Barak, who had rapidly established a strong support base in the party; then by Housing Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer; Barak’s main future leadership rival, Haim Ramon; and then Finance Minister Avraham Shochat.

The Likud party primaries, held the very next day, also produced a surprise winner, newly recruited ex-army Northern Command chief Yitzhak Mordechai. After him came more familiar names — former defense minister Ariel Sharon; ex-party leadership candidate Moshe Katsav; the late Menachem Begin’s son, Benny; and Jerusalem mayor Ehud Olmert. What the two votes had in common, of course, was that each party had chosen a respected ex-general as one of its most popular candidates — Barak in Labor, Mordechai in the Likud — underlining the prevailing preoccupation with the security aspects of the peace accords.

**The Election Campaign; PLO Charter**

With the primaries completed, the election campaign itself began in earnest, conducted throughout under the threat of further Hamas and Islamic Jihad attacks. There were reports of a deal struck between Arafat and Hamas to prevent more blasts before election day, but Israel was taking no chances, steadily intensifying closure orders barring Palestinians from crossing into Israel from the West Bank or Gaza. The Hebron redeployment scheduled for March was postponed in the light of the suicide bombings, but when Peres and Arafat held a meeting on April 18 — the first since the flurry of blasts — they agreed that it would go ahead in late May (a strange choice, given that date’s proximity to the elections; however, in the event, it was not honored). The two men also discussed the PLO Charter issue and the imminent commencement of “final status” talks — negotiations on the most complex issues of the peace process, including the fate of Jerusalem and of the settlements, the question of Palestinian refugees, the nature of the Palestinian entity and its borders — which were due to begin on May 4.

A week after that meeting, on April 24, Arafat convened the Palestine National Council in closed-door session to resolve the issue of the charter. A statement issued after the meeting stated that the PNC had voted, by 504 votes to 54, to revoke anti-Israel clauses of the charter and to draw up a new charter within six months. This arrangement seemed clearly designed to benefit Peres’s election chances, since it spared the prime minister the potential embarrassment of having to react, prior to the elections, to a revised charter that would doubtless have called for the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. The Israeli watchdog group Peace Watch subsequently asserted that the PNC had not annulled sections of the charter as required by the Oslo accords, but had merely frozen them. But the Foreign Ministry’s Uri Savir said the government was satisfied that sections calling for Israel’s destruction were indeed “null and void in all points.” And a euphoric Peres praised the vote as “the greatest ideological
change this century” and incontrovertible proof of Arafat’s integrity and commitment to the peace process.

The election campaign heated up in early May. Under an anachronistic Israeli law, candidates were forbidden from appearing on television or speaking on the radio in the three weeks prior to polling day; instead they were allocated time daily on both TV and radio to broadcast campaign commercials, highlighting the perceived strengths of their policies and the weaknesses of their rivals. Given the change in the electoral system, the battle that really mattered was that between Peres and Netanyahu for the premiership. Opinion polls in the weeks ahead of May 29 consistently showed Peres some 5 percent ahead of Netanyahu, but with 10 or 15 percent of voters still undecided and most of them expected to opt ultimately for the Likud. The election was, in other words, too close to call.

Advised by an American political advertising guru, Arthur Finkelstein, Netanyahu fought by far the more effective campaign. His TV commercials hammered away at a few straightforward themes: the sense of fear of further bombings; Peres’s perceived readiness to compromise over the sovereignty of Jerusalem; Arafat’s ambitions for Palestinian statehood with Jerusalem as capital; and the PLO leader’s failure to thwart the extremist bombers. Netanyahu’s central slogan was “Netanyahu — making a secure peace,” a magical formula that appealed to all Israelis but struck some, certainly Peres’s supporters, as illusory. In contrast to what he charged Peres would do, Netanyahu pledged never to compromise on the issue of Jerusalem, to retain all settlements and allocate government funds to expand them, to oppose Palestinian statehood, and to rule out a territorial compromise on the Golan for peace with Syria.

For his campaign ads, his advisers had constructed a studio designed to resemble the Oval Office, giving the candidate an aura of seasoned authority to compensate for his youthful appearance and lack of high-office experience. Netanyahu also campaigned extraordinarily energetically himself, criss-crossing the country to press the flesh in traditional political style, just as he had done three years earlier in sweeping to the Likud leadership. He made sure to meet with the crucial voting blocs — cultivating support among Russian immigrant voters, targeting new young voters, doing his utmost to insure mass support among the ultra-Orthodox, and also campaigning in such traditional Labor territory as Arab towns and villages, where Peres’s image had been adversely affected by the killing of civilians in April’s “Operation Grapes of Wrath” onslaught in Lebanon (see below).

Where Netanyahu personally directed his own campaign, Peres put his fortunes in the hands of Haim Ramon and, to a lesser extent, Ehud Barak. Ramon directed the campaign commercials which, surprisingly, hardly focused on the Rabin assassination and the right-wing extremism that triggered it, instead concentrating on the achievements of the peace process and the hopes for regional stability that comprehensive peace could realize. The rivalry between Ramon and Barak seemed to damage the campaign, with Ramon apparently restricting Barak’s effective appearances in the campaign ads. Unlike Netanyahu, Peres did not throw himself into street campaigning; instead he made prime-ministerial-style visits to local
councils and schools, trying to create the impression of a statesman running the country, above the dirty political fray, disinclined to enter direct confrontation with a candidate he clearly regarded as unworthy of the name. The central Peres slogan was "Israel is strong with Peres," a message clearly designed to appeal to undecided centrist voters.

Overall, the campaign was marked by restraint, the shadow of the Rabin assassination still present. Netanyahu and the Likud, in particular, preferred not to organize mass rallies that might rekindle memories of the raucous pre-assassination demonstrations the party had organized. There was one incident of election violence—a Labor Party activist was shot in the leg by Likud activists as he pasted Peres posters onto a billboard in Herzliyah. But apart from that one shooting and minor clashes between rival activists elsewhere, the campaign never got out of hand. Peres and Netanyahu agreed to cancel the mass rallies with which they had intended to culminate the campaigning, for reasons of funding, fears of internal violence, and also fears of Palestinian violence. The Palestinian threat was underlined on May 13, when a 17-year-old yeshivah student was shot dead outside the West Bank settlement of Beit El; however, with security at its highest possible level and the closure orders all but hermetic, the election period passed without a much-feared Hamas suicide blast.

On May 26, three days before polling day, the two men held their only televised debate of the campaign, a half-hour confrontation in a highly restrictive format that gave the moderator, journalist Dan Margalit, little opportunity to question the candidates searchingly. Instead, the "debate" amounted to a reciting of policy positions and slogans, and it was the more vigorous, better-prepared Netanyahu who comprehensively outperformed Peres. The content centered on the future of Jerusalem, Islamic extremist violence, and other familiar issues, but while Peres gave tired, often unfocused answers, Netanyahu was in sparkling form and had clearly even timed his answers in advance to insure that he used every second of his allocated air time, completing his remarks exactly as a beeper rang to indicate his time was up.

Surveys conducted after the debate indicated that Netanyahu had now pulled neck and neck with Peres. The Likud candidate received a further eve-of-polling boost in the shape of a blessing from a leading Sephardic rabbinical figure, Rabbi Yitzhak Kadurie, whose Shas Party had hitherto refrained from endorsing either candidate.

The Vote

Apart from the two prime-ministerial contenders, 19 parties were competing for seats in the 120-member Knesset. Most significant among the new parties were Natan Sharansky's Yisrael B'Aliyah—dedicated to improving conditions for new immigrants—and Avigdor Kahalani's Third Way—a centrist movement that backed most elements of the Oslo accords but adamantly opposed a land-for-peace deal with Syria on the Golan Heights. Neither of these two parties endorsed
either prime-ministerial contender, but the Third Way was perceived as being
closer to Peres, and Sharansky was known to be a close personal friend of
Netanyahu's.

Precisely 3,933,250 Israelis were eligible to vote on May 29, and 79.3 percent
of them did so. Netanyahu went on campaigning throughout polling day, start-
ing in the Golan Heights and working his way south. Peres made a few visits to
local party branches in the center of the country but thereafter kept a lower pro-
file amid reports of anonymous telephoned death threats.

When the polling booths closed at 10 P.M., Israel Television broadcast an "exit
poll" based on a survey of tens of thousands of voters leaving polling stations,
which put Peres ahead 50.7 to 49.3. Ecstatic Labor supporters celebrated at the
party headquarters in Tel Aviv, and many dejected Likud loyalists slunk home
from their HQ. A determinedly upbeat Netanyahu, accompanied by David Levy
and Yitzhak Mordechai, assured Likud loyalists that the night was still young and
that the picture could yet change. And, indeed, it did. TV's pollsters adjusted their
predictions, first to show a dead heat, and then to put Netanyahu slightly ahead.
By morning, with all votes counted except for some 150,000 soldiers and other
absentee ballots, Netanyahu was clearly if only slightly ahead. And the counting
of the absentee ballots, on Friday, May 31, confirmed Netanyahu the victor, by
the wafer-thin margin of 50.49 to 49.51—fewer than 30,000 votes.

No sooner had the final figures been announced on Friday afternoon, than
Peres telephoned Netanyahu to congratulate him and wish him success. Ne-
tanyahu moved to reassure the Arab world of his commitment to the peace
process by telephoning Jordan's King Hussein and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and
having an aide call Arafat's deputy, Abu Mazen. President Clinton, who had in-
dicated a preference for Peres by urging Israelis to back the continuation of the
peace process, now telephoned Netanyahu to offer congratulations and invite him
to Washington. In a victory speech on June 2, Netanyahu again reiterated his com-
mitment to the peace process, although without mentioning the Oslo accords
specifically. He also pledged to be the prime minister of all Israelis—secular and
religious, Arab and Jew, new immigrant and veteran.

Election Analysis

Analysis of voting patterns showed the ultra-Orthodox community to have
voted en masse for Netanyahu; Israeli Arabs, with a turnout of 77 percent, had
voted overwhelmingly for Peres—but 19,000 had voted for Netanyahu, and some
10,000—15,000 more had placed blank ballots in the prime-ministerial envelope,
indicating dissatisfaction with both candidates. Russian immigrants, who had
voted strongly for Rabin in 1992, now went by a small margin for Netanyahu. Al-
though his overall margin of victory was less than 1 percent, among Jewish vot-
ers Netanyahu won by a decisive 11 percent.

While most of the media focus had been on the crucial prime minister's race,
the party vote was also fascinating and significant. Most noticeable was the rise in the representation of minor parties at the expense of Labor and the Likud. Labor's Knesset standing fell from 44 seats to 34; the Likud-Tsomet-Gesher alliance dipped from 40 to 32. Reaping the benefits were Sharansky's Yisrael B'Aliyah with seven seats, the Third Way with four, and the various religious parties. Although the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism remained unchanged with four seats, the Sephardi Shas soared from six to ten, and the modern Orthodox National Religious Party (NRP) from six to nine—giving the religious bloc as a whole a powerful 23 seats, up from 16. The far-right Moledet dipped from three to two. And the two Arab parties—the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality and the United Arab List—rose from three and two seats to five and four seats, respectively. It was as though voters, having cast their ballots for prime minister, now felt free to desert Labor and Likud and cast their party ballots for parties that represented their more particular interests.

RELIGIOUS VOTE

The NRP gains surprised few. Orthodox voters who had supported the Likud under the old electoral system were now free to vote for the NRP. The party also ran what was widely regarded as a successful election campaign, steering away from the overtly right-wing message of Greater Israel that it had championed in 1992—even though four of the first six candidates on the party's list were settlers from the West Bank and Gaza Strip—and focusing instead on Jewish values and Jewish education. In its election commercials, for instance, the party made overtures to non-Orthodox voters, a move that NRP leaders believed helped them to pick up as much as a full Knesset seat.

The real election shock was Shas's performance. Prior to the elections, the party was in disarray, it had little money, and party boss Aryeh Deri was battling corruption charges in an ongoing trial. The rosier predictions suggested four or at most five seats.

But, as in past elections, the pollsters and the pundits underestimated Shas, failing to pay sufficient attention to social and cultural factors, particularly among many Jews of North African descent. Most of the party support came from the poor neighborhoods in the big cities or from development towns with populations of immigrant origin—located in far-flung parts of the country where unemployment was often high. By providing low-cost day-care centers and afternoon schools for families in which both parents had to work, Shas's El Hama'ayan national educational network helped to lift part of the economic burden of the poor and insured that their children were learning rather than roaming the streets. Besides keeping fees low, Shas also provided transport to and from school and daily meals. The political payoff came on May 29.

Shas's political power also drew strength from the feelings of cultural alienation among many of its supporters, the residue of the years of mass immigra-
tion in the 1950s, when Sephardic Jews encountered an Ashkenazic ruling elite that they saw as denigrating their culture and traditions. The party offered people a sense of community and belonging and at the same time helped to boost their self-esteem.

Party boss Deri also ran a well-planned campaign, putting little into TV commercials and preferring a more intimate approach. Party activists went door-to-door, distributing at least 150,000 amulets—medallions from the elderly mystic Rabbi Yitzhak Kadurie—with the implied message: Vote for Shas and be blessed.

In a stroke of campaign genius, Deri invited some of the country’s leading soccer players to a meeting with the party’s spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, where he filmed them being blessed by the sage and then used the footage in the party’s commercials. The footage was particularly effective in winning soccer-loving voters who, unlike the party’s ultra-Orthodox leaders, did not adhere to Orthodox practice and would see no contradiction in attending synagogue on a Saturday morning and a soccer match in the afternoon. Perhaps Shas’s most powerful weapon, as in past elections, was its spiritual mentor, Rabbi Yosef—the embodiment of Sephardic religious pride. His weekly post-Shabbat sermons, broadcast via satellite to thousands of people at dozens of sites around Israel and even abroad, proved a crucial vote puller.

The only religious party not to grow was United Torah Judaism—made up of the hassidic Agudath Israel and the Lithuanian Degel Hatorah—which remained stuck at four seats despite a high natural growth rate. By allowing its supporters to vote for a secular candidate for prime minister—a similar decision was taken in the Jerusalem local elections in 1993, when the party supported the Likud’s Ehud Olmert for mayor—the taboo on voting for a secular party was also removed. The result: some of UTJ’s supporters voted for nonreligious right-wing parties like the Likud and Moledet.

On the prime-ministerial front, the religious parties played a crucial role in tipping the balance in favor of Benjamin Netanyahu. While the NRP supported the Likud candidate from the outset, the rabbis of United Torah Judaism procrastinated, fearful that if they openly supported one candidate and he ended up losing the election, it would cost them dearly when it came to the coalition bargaining stage. Ultimately dragged along by the rank and file and the decision by Degel Hatorah’s spiritual mentor, Rabbi Eliezer Schach, to support Netanyahu, they gave the right-wing candidate their blessing in the final days before the election. While Shas’s Rabbi Yosef remained neutral, Rabbi Kadurie did not, blessing Netanyahu two days before the ballots were cast. Chabad Hassidim also came out in strong support of Netanyahu, campaigning vociferously in the final days before the election with the controversial slogan “Netanyahu is good for the Jews,” which drew criticism for its racist overtones.

While pundits related this almost wall-to-wall religious support for Netanyahu in part to hawkish views on the peace process, they also pointed to the deep-seated antipathy among the religious for the overtly secularist Meretz party, Labor’s ju-
ior coalition partner, and for the stridently secular members of Labor whom they perceived as a threat to the Jewishness of the state. Netanyahu’s victory, said Eliezer Don-Yehiya, professor of political science at Bar-Ilan University, was less a “personal achievement” and more a result of the fact that “the religious were voting against a government in which the partners were Meretz and the Arabs and overt Labor secularists like Yael Dayan. The government had an anti-religious image. I heard many people say they preferred Peres over Netanyahu and supported the peace process, but they weren’t prepared for a government with Meretz, which ran campaign spots that verged on anti-Semitism.”

ARAB VOTE

Israel’s 1996 election was expected to hinge in good part on the battle between the country’s 800,000 Arab citizens, the vast majority of whom voted for Shimon Peres, and the 300,000 ultra-Orthodox, who provided Benjamin Netanyahu with support en masse. But while the Arab parties’ five seats in the 1992 election had crucially helped Yitzhak Rabin to muster a narrow 61-seat majority, this time not even the unprecedented Arab turnout—77 percent voted as opposed to 69 percent in 1992—could help Peres achieve victory.

Viewing the peace process as a crucial step in the normalization of their own position within Israeli society and their quest for equality, the country’s Arabs pledged massive support for Peres at the outset of the campaign in mid-February. But that changed in April with Operation Grapes of Wrath and the Israeli artillery bombardment of the UN base at Qana in which some 100 Lebanese civilians were killed.

While Peres’s decision to unleash a massive aerial bombardment of Lebanon was sparked by Hezbollah Katyusha rocket attacks on civilian settlements in northern Israel, it could not be divorced from the preelection atmosphere and the fear in the Labor camp that if the government did not react it was in danger of losing the support of floating voters wondering whether Peres was too soft on security issues. But not only did Operation Grapes of Wrath fail to boost Peres’s popularity among Jewish voters, it ended up alienating a small but crucial number of Arab voters. Incensed Arab MKs and community leaders blasted the prime minister after the Qana tragedy, labeled him a “child murderer,” and threatened that Arabs would withdraw their support and put blank slips into the ballot box.

Labor, as a result, was forced to spend the preelection month trying to placate the Arabs. Peres, for instance, hinted that if he was elected, he would appoint the country’s first-ever Arab minister. Early on election day it appeared that Labor’s efforts had fallen on deaf ears, as voters in the Arab sector trickled to the polls. By mid-afternoon, with Labor leaders panicking, a major mobilization began. Peres himself took over the reins, calling Arab local government heads and imploving them to get the residents of their towns and villages to the polls. Labor leaders, including campaign head Haim Ramon, set off for towns in the Arab sec-
tor to drum up support. Even the Palestinian Authority’s radio station broadcast impassioned calls to the Arabs to go and vote.

The result was an avalanche of Arab voters flocking to the polls in the last three hours before they closed, leaving Labor leaders with the mistaken impression that because of the unusually high Arab turnout they had won the election. When the nerve-wracking vote counting was finally over, it emerged that 19,000 Arabs had voted for Netanyahu, and a further 12,000 had put blank slips in the ballot box—numbers that proved crucial, considering Netanyahu’s victory margin of less than 30,000 votes.

In the Knesset, the Arab parties almost doubled their support, boosting their number of seats from five to nine. The communist Democratic Front for Peace and Equality increased its share from three to five seats, while a joint list comprising the Democratic Arab Party (which won two seats in 1992) and the Islamic Movement (participating for the first time ever in an election) won four seats. A third list, the Progressive Party, failed to pass the electoral threshold. Ahmad Tibi, an adviser to Yasir Arafat, set up a fourth list—the Arab Party for Progress and Renewal—but was unable to turn his close relationship with the PLO chief into political support among Israeli Arabs; he pulled out of the race days before the election when it became clear that his list would not pass the electoral threshold.

The effort to create a unified Arab list was aimed at boosting their political clout and enabling them to push for greater equality, especially in increased funding to Arab local governments, which receive considerably less than their Jewish counterparts. But the unification venture was only partially successful. Initially it was spearheaded by Tibi, a Taibeh-born doctor, and Abdallah Nimr Darawshe (Darwish), the head of the Islamic Movement in Israel and the face of nonextremist Islam. While Darawshe was jailed in the early 1980s for extremist Islamic activism, he said he forged a new philosophy behind bars that negated violence. “An Islamic movement cannot be violent,” he said, “except under conditions of occupation or oppression. In Israel, under democratic conditions, violence is unacceptable.”

But personal enmity—largely between Tibi and Darawshe, who once derided Arafat’s adviser as “a nobody . . . with no following”—punctured the united front, and the Islamic Movement ended up forming a joint list only with Darawshe’s Democratic Arab Party, while Tibi went solo. Even the Islamic movement failed to reach a unified decision on whether to enter Israeli politics, with the movement’s hard-liners refusing to support the decision to run for the Knesset.

The increased Arab turnout at the polls, analysts said, partly explained the growth in Arab Knesset representation. But they also pointed to the fact that many Arabs withdrew their support for the Labor Party in protest over the Qana killing and voted instead for one of the Arab parties.

**Forming a Government**

Preferring not to respond to comments from Syria, Hamas, and some Arafat loyalists to the effect that his victory amounted to an Israeli declaration of war,
Netanyahu busied himself with the intricate task of forming a government. He had two hurdles to overcome: reconciling the religious parties' demands for funding and new religious legislation with often contradictory demands from Sharansky's party; and appointing a cabinet in such a way as to satisfy the ambitions of key political figures.

While Netanyahu negotiated away, Peres remained prime minister, dealing with a new outbreak of Palestinian extremist violence that saw a husband and wife from Kiryat Arba shot dead in a drive-by shooting at Geffen, inside Israel, on June 10.

Netanyahu's coalition deals were finally completed on June 17, and the government was sworn in a day later. The mainstay of the coalition was the Likud-Tsomet-Gesher alliance, which was joined by the three religious parties, Sharansky's immigrant list, and Kahalani's Third Way.

Though Netanyahu pledged that his new cabinet team would work together to unite Israel, broaden the network of peace, and boost its economy, there was precious little unity around the cabinet table. The agreements with the various small parties had been relatively easily sewn up; the allocation of ministries to leading coalition figures proved more complex and acrimonious. To woo them into the coalition, Netanyahu gave substantial cabinet responsibility to the Third Way (naming Kahalani as minister for internal security) and Yisrael B'Aliyah (naming Sharansky as trade minister and Yuli Edelstein as immigrant absorption minister). The religious parties also fared well: NRP head Zevulun Hammer was made education minister and deputy prime minister, and his colleague Yitzhak Levy transport and energy minister; Shas took control of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs; United Torah Judaism was given effective control of the Housing and Construction Ministry. Ya'akov Ne'eeman, a veteran lawyer and a political outsider, was named justice minister.

All that left precious few jobs for the Likud's own bloc. Initially, Netanyahu offered his most dangerous rival, Dan Meridor, a middling portfolio, but relented under Likud pressure and appointed him to the Finance Ministry. Yitzhak Mordechai, the general who had been passed over a year earlier for the job of deputy chief of staff and had hung up his uniform, now found himself bossing his old commanders as defense minister. Another ex-general, Rafael Eitan, had been slated for a top job, but an imminent indictment forced him to make do with the environment and agriculture portfolios and a deputy prime ministership. David Levy had been promised the Foreign Ministry well in advance and was also named deputy prime minister. Moshe Katsav, another prominent Likud figure, got only the Tourism Ministry, but was compensated with yet another deputy prime ministership. Longtime loyalists Tzahi Hanegbi and Limor Livnat were rewarded with the Health and Communications Ministries, respectively, and the late Menachem Begin's son, Ze'ev "Benny" Begin, was named science minister.

This left no place for Ariel Sharon, who was left out of the initial coalition jigsaw—despite having engineered Netanyahu's victory by withdrawing his own prime-ministerial candidacy, brokering the Likud-Tsomet-Gesher alliance, and
wooing the ultra-Orthodox sages ahead of election day. When it became clear that Sharon had been left out, hours before Netanyahu was to name his cabinet before the Knesset on June 18, Levy took an unexpected stand of solidarity with Sharon and refused to be named as foreign minister. A mini-revolt threatened, with nine Likud Knesset members threatening to abstain or even vote against the new government. Netanyahu relented and hurriedly promised to build Sharon a new ministerial portfolio, to be called the Ministry of National Infrastructure. The cabinet was approved 62 to 50 by the Knesset, and the requisite photograph of the new government with President Weizman was taken late on June 18. However, in the days that followed, ministers refused to sanction the thinning-down of their ministries necessitated by the new Sharon post, and so no new ministry was created; for the time being, at least, Sharon remained outside the cabinet.

THE NEW LIKUD-LED GOVERNMENT
(installed June 18, 1996)

Prime Minister, Housing and Construction Minister,*
Religious Affairs Minister
Benjamin Netanyahu (Likud)

Foreign Affairs & Deputy Prime Minister
David Levy (Gesher)

Defense
Yitzhak Mordechai (Likud)

Finance
Dan Meridor (Likud)

Justice
Ya'akov Ne'eman

Internal Security
Avigdor Kahalani (Third Way)

Education and Culture & Deputy Prime Minister
Zevulun Hammer (NRP)

Agriculture and Environment & Deputy Prime Minister
Rafael Eitan (Tsomet)

Labor and Social Affairs
Eli Yishai (Shas)

Interior
Eli Suissa (Shas)

Transport and Energy
Yitzhak Levy (NRP)

Industry and Trade
Natan Sharansky (Yisrael B'Aliyah)

Immigrant Absorption
Yuli Edelstein (Yisrael B'Aliyah)

Tourism & Deputy Prime Minister
Moshe Katsav (Likud)

Communications
Limor Livnat (Likud)

Health
Tzahi Hanegbi (Likud)

Science and Technology
Ze'ev Binyamin Begin (Likud)

*Netanyahu maintained this ministerial position formally (Deputy Minister Meir Porush, United Torah Judaism, had effective responsibility) until the subsequent appointment of Ariel Sharon as minister of national infrastructure.
At 46, Netanyahu was the youngest of Israel's nine prime ministers — the only one born since the founding of the state. Jerusalem-born, the second of three sons, his elder brother, Yoni, was the only military fatality in Israel's epic 1976 hostage rescue mission at Entebbe, Uganda. Netanyahu spent much of his youth in the United States, where his father pursued an academic career. He followed Yoni into the elite Sayeret Matkal commando unit, then studied at MIT — taking a first degree in architecture and then an MBA. He was brought into politics by Moshe Arens, first as Arens's deputy when he served as ambassador to Washington in 1982, then as Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, and then as Arens's deputy at the Foreign Ministry under Prime Minister Shamir. In that capacity, Netanyahu attended the 1991 Madrid peace conference, where he charmed and impressed Arab journalists with his skillful presentation of Israel's case. Three times married, Netanyahu made a bizarre public confession in 1993 that he had cheated on his current wife, Sara, saying he had been filmed in the act of adultery and was being blackmailed. He subsequently retracted the blackmail allegations, but the episode left a question mark over both his judgement and integrity. This concern was reinforced when it was proven that he had — despite adamant denials — anglicized his name to Benjamin Netay when studying in the United States, and when doubts surfaced over when exactly he had given up his dual American citizenship.

Netanyahu's organizational skills in restructuring the Likud and his obvious talents as a communicator helped smooth his victory path. But he was an unproven leader, and he immediately faced stark choices regarding the peace process.

Netanyahu and the Peace Process

Peres's defeat sent shock waves through the Arab world, where Netanyahu's hard-line campaign rhetoric had been viewed with some dismay. While Netanyahu was still working to build a coalition, various Arab leaders were engaged in a flurry of summit talks — Syria's Hafez al-Assad with Egypt's Hosni Mubarak; Jordan's King Hussein with Mubarak and Arafat; Assad with Mubarak and Saudi crown prince Abdullah. Finally, for the first time in five years, Mubarak set about convening a full-fledged Arab summit (Iraq excluded), in Cairo on June 21–23.

The government's platform and Netanyahu's opening address as prime minister featured calls to the Arab world to move the peace process forward, and Netanyahu pledged a readiness for talks with countries such as Syria "without preconditions." The government guidelines did, however, explicitly rule out Palestinian statehood, the return of Palestinian refugees, and any compromise over Jerusalem; they pledged support for Jewish settlement and stated that Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights was an essential basis for a peace agreement with Syria. These were all positions that heightened Palestinian and Syrian dis-
may in the days prior to the Arab summit on the 21st. And although the U.S. administration urged Mubarak to insure that the summit’s final communique was not overly hostile, the concluding statement issued by the Arab leaders contained an explicit warning to Netanyahu not to deviate from the terms of the peace process, with the threat that the Arab states would reconsider their positions were he to do so.

His first test was over the issue of redeploying Israeli forces in Hebron. The outgoing government had delayed the pullout; the Palestinians, the United States, and the watching world expected him to honor the commitment. However, to pull out the troops would be to incur the wrath of many of those who had helped bring him to power. On June 25, Secretary of State Warren Christopher flew to Jerusalem for a first meeting with the new prime minister, preparing the ground for the scheduled Netanyahu-Clinton meeting in early July in Washington. Netanyahu gave him no clear answers on whether he would personally meet with Arafat in the short term, or, most importantly, on how he intended to proceed with Hebron. It was a difficult dilemma, the first of many that Netanyahu would inevitably encounter.

OTHER DIPLOMATIC DEVELOPMENTS

Relations with Jordan

Israel’s ties with its eastern neighbor, Jordan, continued to blossom in the period under review, symbolized by a joint airplane and helicopter flypast during the week of October 26, 1995, marking the first anniversary of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty.

The improving relationship was underlined by the October Amman economic summit. A year earlier, some 2,000 Israeli and Arab representatives had gathered in Casablanca for an unprecedented conference on regional trade and cooperation—a groundbreaking event, but one that gave rise to Arab fears that Israel was seeking to achieve economic hegemony in the Middle East. The Amman conference was a more substantive affair. Israel sent a few dozen businesspeople and officials—as opposed to half the cabinet and hundreds of delegates in Casablanca—and got down to nuts-and-bolts discussion of joint projects. Highlighting the Arab world’s increasing acceptance of Israel’s economic regional role, the conference coincided with an Egyptian announcement that it was expanding economic ties with Israel, Jordan’s own decision to remove barriers to trade, and a deal involving the future supply to Israel of natural gas from the Gulf principality of Qatar. Syria boycotted the conference, and Iraq was not invited, but other Arab participation was impressive, extending to business executives from Lebanon—present despite their government’s official boycott of such dealings with Israel. In an opening address to the conference, Rabin recalled that some cynics had scoffed “that after the final handshakes of the Casablanca conference,
the dust would once again settle on the Middle East.” The presence of hundreds
of representatives of big corporations and multinational companies, he asserted,
proved the contrary, proved that “the process which was started in Casablanca
was a success.”

Among the projects discussed were the development of the Taba-Eilat-Aqaba
tourism area, tourist parks along the Jordan Rift Valley, plans for “peace high-
ways” linking Arab states to Israel’s Mediterranean ports, and the linking up of
ergy infrastructure such as electrical power grids and gas and even oil pipelines.
Less dramatic ventures included proposals for boosting the already impressive
Israel-Jordan two-way tourism traffic, joint agricultural ventures, and manufac-
turing projects that capitalized on low Jordanian labor costs.

The level of trust and common interest between the two countries was also ev-
indered by the series of patients—wounded soldiers and others—who Jordan
sent for treatment to Israeli hospitals, and by the unprecedented joint dispatch
of consignments of medicine, food, and clothing to Tuzla in northern Bosnia in
late July.

King Hussein personified the warmth of the newly sealed ties, cutting a somber,
grief-stricken figure at the funeral of Rabin in Jerusalem on November 6. It was
his first visit to the city since Israel captured the eastern sector from Jordan in
1967, and, in his extraordinarily moving address at the funeral, the king noted
how shocked he was to find himself returning to Jerusalem in such circumstances.
“Never in all my thoughts would it occur to me that my first visit to Jerusalem
in response to your [Rabin’s] invitation,” he said, “would be on such an occasion.”
The king used his speech to urge other Arab leaders to “come out openly and
speak of peace,” and indicated that if he ultimately fell victim to an assassin’s bul-
lets—as had his own grandfather and as had Rabin—shot dead for his efforts
for peace, it would be a proud death.

Two months later, Hussein was back in Israel again, making a first official visit
to Tel Aviv, on January 10, 1996. He piloted his own helicopter into Tel Aviv’s
Sdeh Dov airport, then drove along streets lined with young Israelis brandishing
Israeli and Jordanian flags to Ichilov Hospital. There, he attended a ceremony
naming a new trauma unit in Rabin’s memory and talked with two Jordanian pi-
lots receiving medical treatment. Later that day, he traveled north to the shores
of the Kinneret for a ceremony honoring the two heads of the Israel-Jordan
peace negotiating teams, Elyakim Rubinstein and Fayez Tarawneh.

The genuine commitment to strong ties was demonstrated in such trivial as-
pects as the king’s sending his palace chef to an international chefs’ festival in
Jerusalem in March, as well as through such concrete links as the opening of a
direct passenger air link between Tel Aviv and Amman, operated by a subsidiar-
y of the national Royal Jordanian Airlines, inaugurated on April 7. Hussein’s son
Faisal flew in on the first flight. Two days earlier, an El Al plane from Paris had
become the first Israeli passenger airliner to touch down in Amman, after being
prevented by fog from making its scheduled landing in Tel Aviv.

Though a true friend of Rabin’s and a beneficiary of and contributor to Peres’s
vision of a new Middle East, Hussein was more circumspect than many Arab leaders in the lead-up to the May Israeli elections. He reportedly turned down an invitation from Peres to visit Israel at the height of the election campaign—a move that would have boosted Peres's candidacy—and maintained open lines of communication to Netanyahu. When Netanyahu's victory was confirmed, one of his first calls was to Hussein, who congratulated him on his victory and said he saw the new Israeli prime minister, too, as a genuine friend. And while some Palestinian spokespersons, sections of the Syrian state media, and other Arab voices quickly denounced Netanyahu's victory as likely to be fatal to the peace process, Hussein indicated his belief that Netanyahu would maintain Israel’s commitment to the peace process and applauded the democratic shift of power in Israel. Indeed, when he was in Washington for talks with President Clinton on June 11, Hussein said he was baffled by Arab dismay at Netanyahu’s election and was convinced the new prime minister intended to stick with the peace process.

Netanyahu was set to visit Jordan in early July, to underline the continuing strong Israeli-Jordanian relationship. Before then, on June 26, there was a rare incident of violence on the border—a group of Palestinian gunmen crossed the border and ambushed an Israeli patrol, killing three soldiers. The attack was condemned by Netanyahu and by King Hussein, and both sides highlighted the cooperation between the two countries’ security forces in the subsequent effort to track down the attackers. A statement of responsibility for the ambush was issued by a renegade PLO splinter group based in Damascus, prompting Netanyahu to give a series of newspaper and television interviews charging Syria with fomenting terrorism in Israel, Jordan, elsewhere in the Middle East, and worldwide.

**Relations with Egypt**

Two issues continued to dominate the still “cold peace” between Israel and Egypt: nuclear arms and dead prisoners of war. Throughout 1994 and the first half of 1995, Egypt had lobbied for international support to persuade Israel to allow inspectors into its nuclear installations, warning that it might not sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) renewal if Israel did not give way. In the event, when the NPT vote came up in May 1995, Egypt had fallen into line and voted to extend the treaty. But it continued to press its demands for greater Israeli accountability at every opportunity, and in December that pressure led to an unprecedented statement by Peres that was tantamount to an admission of Israel’s nuclear capabilities. In a television interview, the prime minister indicated that Israel would be willing to forgo the nuclear option once comprehensive peace had been attained in the Middle East. “Give me peace,” he offered, “and we will give up the atom.”

The argument over alleged mistreatment of prisoners of war erupted in August 1995, when an Israeli reserve general, Arieh Biro, admitted that he had ordered the killing of 49 Egyptian war prisoners during the 1956 Sinai Campaign. His explanation: his unit had been given orders to change position, and he could
not spare enough men to guard the POWs properly. His comments made headlines in the Egyptian newspapers and triggered several extremely hostile articles, in some of which Israel's ambassador to Egypt, David Sultan, was said to have played a direct role in the 1956 POW killings—impossible, given that Sultan was still a schoolboy at the time. The controversy also prompted a number of lawsuits, filed by the Egyptian families of the alleged victims.

Both Rabin and Peres made extensive behind-the-scenes efforts to lay the issue to rest, noting that tales of such murderous activities in the 1956, 1967, and 1973 wars had been heard in Israel, too, with Egyptian soldiers the alleged killers. Far better, Israel argued, to consign the regrettable allegations on both sides to history. But Mubarak was not impressed and demanded a full-scale Israeli investigation of the whole affair. Peres reluctantly agreed, telling Mubarak in December that the reserve general and former Tel Aviv mayor Shlomo Lahat was being appointed to lead an inquiry into the matter.

With the POW law suits still unresolved, 1,152 Egyptian citizens launched a new flurry of legal action against Israel in May 1996. In suits filed in the Egyptian courts, two groups of Egyptians claimed ownership of the Western Wall, the land on which the Negev town of Dimonah is built, and parts of the southern town of Eilat. Their evidence included documentation showing the Muslim leader Saladin to have signed over the Western Wall area to their ancestors in 1193, and a document granting control of villages in the Eilat and Dimonah areas to their ancestors in 1576.

Though wider ties had never developed, Rabin and Mubarak, two ex-generals successful in second careers in politics, had built up a strong personal relationship over the years. And though Mubarak had hitherto always flatly refused Israeli invitations to visit the country, he immediately indicated that he would be attending Rabin's funeral after the November 4 assassination. In a short but heartfelt address, Mubarak praised Rabin's vision of peace and called his death a heavy blow "to our noble cause."

When Rabin's successor, Peres, was defeated in the May elections, however, Mubarak was one of the first Arab leaders to indicate dismay and concern over the perceived threat to the peace process posed by the change in government. He began a series of shuttle missions—meeting first with Syria's President Assad, then with King Hussein and Yasir Arafat, then returning to Damascus for more talks with Assad and Saudi crown prince Abdullah—all within ten days of the elections. The three-way Damascus summit concluded with a joint statement warning that the "cycle of violence" could flare up again if Netanyahu's government did not honor Israel's peace commitments. From June 21 to 23, Mubarak hosted a full Arab summit—the first in five years—at which representatives of 22 Arab states warned Israel against "breaching its commitments" to the peace process and stated that they would reconsider their stance on peacemaking if Israel failed to honor signed accords. The summit, however, refrained from accepting a Syrian call for a freeze on all normalization processes with Israel.
Relations with Syria and Lebanon

While the future of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was placed in some doubt by the May 1996 election results, the prospects of early Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese peace treaties appeared to have disappeared altogether. Whereas the outgoing Peres government had indicated an unprecedented readiness for far-reaching territorial compromise on the Golan Heights in return for full peace with Syria, new prime minister Netanyahu made clear his adamant opposition to any kind of land-for-peace deal on the Golan. The window of opportunity for a comprehensive Middle East peace, as the U.S. State Department liked to call it, appeared to have closed.

Peres’s repeated optimistic assertions that peace with Syria was within reach probably cost him many thousands of votes when it came to election day. There can be little doubt, either, that had President Hafez al-Assad shown the Israeli public more overt proof of his purported willingness to make peace with Israel, Peres’s credibility with the voters would have been crucially boosted. But the ever-cautious Assad was unprepared to take advantage of the Peres government’s readiness for flexibility, and the opportunity slipped away.

The period under review was marked by brief outbursts of Israeli and Syrian optimism over perceived headway in negotiations, punctured by diplomatic stalemates and upsurges of violence on the Israeli-Lebanon border, where the dominant Syrian troops tacitly encouraged Hezbollah gunmen to strike at Israeli targets.

Fearful of the potential consequences of direct clashes across the Israeli-Syrian border, Damascus, as it had for 20 years, instead helped foment or did little to stop anti-Israel violence in its client state Lebanon. Clashes continued almost without respite throughout 1995. An Israeli soldier died in a clash with Hezbollah on July 30; another died when attempting to dismantle a bomb in the Israeli-held “security zone” in south Lebanon on September 20; five days later, two more were killed by Hezbollah mortar fire; on October 12, a Hezbollah ambush ended with the loss of three more soldiers; on October 15, six members of the Golani Brigade died when a Hezbollah mine exploded under their armored personnel carrier.

With the Americans mediating, top Israeli and Syrian army officers had met for talks on security arrangements for a peace accord in both December 1994 and June 1995, but without discernible progress. The talks broke down in the summer of 1995 over the Syrian refusal to sanction the maintenance of an Israeli land-based early warning system on the Golan after a withdrawal and were thereafter stalled for several months. Rabin accused Assad of reneging on an explicit commitment to resume talks first on security issues, with other elements of a peace deal to be negotiated only subsequently. American diplomats spoke of a breakdown of trust between the two men. Rabin told aides he believed Assad was trying to drive a particularly hard bargain in the run-up to Israeli elections.
And in the absence of diplomatic progress, the violence in Lebanon went on. On November 28, in a marked escalation of Hezbollah activity, over 20 Katyusha rockets were fired across the border into sovereign Israel, destroying several homes and forcing northern Israeli residents into bomb shelters. While seeking new ways to counteract Hezbollah in the field, newly installed Prime Minister Peres launched a new diplomatic offensive, dropping Rabin’s insistence on security talks first, offering instead to discuss all aspects of a peace treaty simultaneously, stating publicly that he considered the Golan Heights to be, at root, Syrian territory, and indicating a readiness to acknowledge Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. Peres said he wanted continuous talks until a solution was found and proposed raising the level of representation to foreign ministers. Not surprisingly, this change of tone was welcomed in Damascus, where Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa said on November 20 that Peres’s accession to power had improved the chances of comprehensive peace. Although the Syrians declined to upgrade the talks, they did consent to longer sessions of negotiation. Another of Secretary of State Christopher’s frequent shuttle missions to the region secured Israeli and Syrian agreement to resume direct negotiations, on December 27, under U.S. auspices in Maryland. On December 18, the Israeli *Ha’aretz* daily reported that Israeli officials had already prepared a draft peace treaty. But though the Maryland talks continued in 1996, in January and again in February, Peres declined to resume them in March, on the grounds of Syria’s failure to condemn the February-March Hamas suicide bombings, or to take any steps to force Hamas and other extremist groups to close their Damascus headquarters, or to attend the mid-March antiterrorism summit in Sharm al-Sheikh.

The breakdown in negotiations, as so often in the past, coincided with a resumption of south Lebanon violence. March 4 saw four Israeli soldiers killed in a Hezbollah ambush; another died on March 10; yet another on March 20. At the end of March, the conflict took on a new, more dangerous aspect. After Israel accidentally killed two Lebanese civilians in an artillery attack, Hezbollah renewed its Katyusha fire into northern Israel, injuring one Israeli woman in its initial salvo and again forcing northern residents into the bomb shelters.

The Katyusha fire intensified over the following days, as did diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the conflict. Under pressure from opposition politicians and some in his own party to initiate a strong military response, and with northern Israelis fleeing their homes for safety further south, Peres nevertheless held out for the diplomatic route. He used the opportunity to highlight Iran’s role in funding, training, and arming Hezbollah, asserting that Iran was bent on destroying the peace process, and backing an American mediation attempt to force Syrian intervention with the offer of intensified peace talks.

Only on April 11, with the diplomatic avenues having proved dead ends, did Peres turn to the army. Eschewing a massive ground attack that could badly weaken Hezbollah but could also cost many Israeli lives, Peres instead ordered a massive aerial bombardment of southern Lebanon, code-named “Operation
Grapes of Wrath," designed to destroy Hezbollah's capacity for Katyusha fire. The operation went fairly well at first, with army commanders proudly describing pinpoint missile fire they said was doing maximum damage to Hezbollah while leaving civilians unharmed. Much of the world's sympathy was with Israel, indeed, since dozens of Katyushas continued to rain down on the north, and hundreds of homes were hit—even though personal injury was light, because most northern Israelis had evacuated.

The nature of the conflict was transformed, however, on April 18, when Israeli shells hit a United Nations base near the southern Lebanese village of Qana. Lebanese civilians were sheltering inside, and about 100 of them were killed, the grisly scene provoking an international outcry. Israel insisted that the shelling was accidental, citing faulty calculations made by the gunners in the heat of battle, blaming the UN for not providing details on where refugees were hiding, and apologizing for what it called a tragic error. Although a spokesperson for the UN in Lebanon was quoted as saying he believed the Israeli claims of accidental shelling, an official UN report into the incident concluded that such an innocent explanation was "unlikely." Israel's case was badly undermined when its initial claim not to have had an unmanned reconnaissance drone operating in the area at the time proved false and generally by its failure to recognize the scale of the international public-relations disaster it had on its hands.

With world sympathy now unequivocally with Hezbollah and the Lebanese, Peres sought a rapid resolution to the conflict, and Christopher shuttled urgently across the region. By April 26, the ceasefire terms had been hammered out—an approved, if unsigned, document, providing a new "understanding" governing the situation in south Lebanon. This featured a commitment not to target civilians on either side of the border and not to fire from civilian areas, and authorized the establishment of a monitoring committee with representatives from Israel, Syria, Lebanon, the United States, and France.

What the truce failed to achieve, however, was any kind of restriction of Hezbollah attacks on Israeli and Israeli-backed forces inside the security zone. Scarcely had the ink dried on the Christopher-mediated deal when the attacks resumed, calling the entire purpose of the assault into further question and badly damaging Peres's credibility. Among the worst attacks in the wake of Grapes of Wrath were the killings of four Israelis, on May 30, by two remote-controlled roadside bombs in the security zone, and the shooting dead of five Israelis in a Hezbollah ambush on June 10. Peres authorized retaliatory fire following the June 10 ambush, but refrained from more far-reaching measures because he was, by then, a lame-duck prime minister, waiting for Netanyahu to complete his coalition deals and replace him in office. Netanyahu, for his part, promised to "take care" of Hezbollah as soon as his government came into power.

The Netanyahu government's guidelines appeared to rule out any prospect of a land-for-peace deal on the Golan, and Netanyahu's opening weeks in office indicated that he would take a far tougher line against Syria than had his prede-
cessors. In a Hebrew newspaper interview published on June 27, he said that Israel would not “play by the Syrian rules” any longer—holding peace talks while Syria simultaneously waged indirect war against Israeli targets using terrorism. The interview was given a day after three Israeli soldiers were shot dead on the Israel-Jordan border by gunmen from a Syrian-based PLO splinter group. In a worrying escalation of rhetoric, Syrian state media responded to Netanyahu’s remarks by comparing him to Hitler and accusing him of following “racist” anti-Arab policies.

Relations with Other Regional States

Israel’s relations with such implacably hostile regional allies as Libya, Sudan, Iran, Iraq, and Algeria remained as hostile as ever, with Iran repeatedly characterized by Rabin, Peres, and other Israeli leaders as the most potent threat to regional, and indeed worldwide, stability. Each flare-up of violence on the Lebanon border prompted Israeli accusations, not only that Syria was tacitly allowing Hezbollah to target Israel freely, but that Iran was deliberately fueling confrontation with Israel. Both the Rabin and the Peres governments made great efforts to persuade the United States of the need to forge an international coalition against Iran—which Israel accused of training, funding, and inspiring Hezbollah, Hamas, and other Islamic terrorist groups in the Middle East and their offshoots worldwide.

Simultaneously, Israel tried to broaden its relations with more moderate neighbors, and some strides toward reconciliation were made in the period under review. Morocco maintained its low level of relations through an interest section in Tel Aviv. Relations with that country were improved in February 1996 when Israel agreed to pay $400,000 in compensation to the family of Ahmad Bouchiki, a Moroccan waiter whom Israeli Mossad agents mistakenly gunned down in Lillehammer in 1973 while hunting down the PLO terrorists responsible for the previous year’s Munich Olympics massacre.

Tunisia, which had for some time also been expected to open a liaison office in Tel Aviv and to host its Israeli counterpart, stalled for several more months, finally agreeing in February 1996 that the two missions would open in April. However, that month’s Israeli bombardment of Lebanon led the Tunisians to further postpone the dispatch of their representative, although Israel’s envoy did set up Israel’s office in Tunis as scheduled. Only in May did the Tunisian envoy, Khemaies Jhinaoui, finally arrive, with barely enough time to meet with Foreign Minister Barak and Director-General Uri Savir before election day saw the defeat of the Labor government.

There was also some progress toward the formalizing of ties between Israel and some of the Gulf principalities. In October 1995 Foreign Minister Yussuf Bin-Alawi of Oman met with Peres in New York, and they announced plans to open bilateral trade missions in 1996, adding that research was already being con-
ducted into possible joint projects in telecommunications, agriculture, water, and medicine. The following February, the two countries restated that commitment, but it had not been implemented by the end of June, despite a groundbreaking visit to Oman by Peres on April 1. Peres also visited Qatar on that trip, and Israel and Qatar agreed on plans for a similar low-level diplomatic arrangement in May, but again with no firm date for implementation. The North African state of Mauritania, however, did open an interest office, sending a representative to Israel on May 8.

Saudi Arabia, as ever, moved more cautiously than its smaller Gulf neighbors. The foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal al-Saud, struck an upbeat tone when addressing a group of Jewish leaders in New York in October 1995. "If there is peace in the region," he pledged, "I can say unequivocally that we will normalize relations with Israel." But come the following April, there had been no change in the Saudi policy on Israeli Arab pilgrims to the Haj, the 10,000 or so Arabs—from Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza—who made the journey each year. Those from East Jerusalem and the territories were permitted entry on travel documents issued by Yasir Arafat’s Palestinian Authority. The Israeli Arabs crossed into Jordan on Israeli passports, and were there issued with Jordanian documents for the rest of the journey.

**Relations with the United States**

Israel’s strong links with the Clinton administration blossomed throughout the period. American defense and civilian aid continued to flow, and the United States maintained its commitment to the Arrow antimissile defense system. On July 30, Israel Aircraft Industries staged a successful test flight of the latest Arrow prototype. The two countries were also cooperating on a Nautilus laser system designed to shoot down Katyusha rockets, which had a successful trial in New Mexico in February 1996.

Ties actually deepened after the Rabin assassination, when Secretary of State Warren Christopher stepped up his efforts to mediate a peace treaty with Syria, to no avail. But the relationship appeared headed for slightly rockier ground after the change of Israeli government, given that the Clinton administration had all but publicly endorsed Peres’s candidacy.

The issue of moving the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was largely on the back burner in the period under review. Despite White House opposition and Israeli discomfiture, May 1995 had seen bills introduced in the Senate and in the House mandating that the construction of an American embassy complex in Jerusalem should begin by the end of 1996 and allocating $105 million to the project over the coming three years. And in late October the legislation setting a May 31, 1999, deadline for the relocation was overwhelmingly approved. However, a crucial clause empowered the president to delay the move for reasons of national security.
Clinton was an emotional and vital presence at the Rabin funeral in November. Vice-President Al Gore made a highly successful trip to Israel in mid-January 1996, albeit one cut short by a need to return to Washington for urgent budget discussions. And Clinton led the international gathering at the March Sharm al-Sheikh conference on countering terrorism, convened in the aftermath of the February and March Hamas suicide bombings.

Regarding Peres as an architect of the peace process and Netanyahu as a persistent critic, the administration naturally sided with Peres in the election campaign and was caught off guard by Netanyahu's victory. A feature of Labor's election campaign against Netanyahu was that he was not well liked by U.S. policymakers and was said to have offended lawmakers with what Rep. Peter King of New York termed "undiplomatic" behavior over the years. Labor made much of the fact that Secretary of State James Baker had once banned him from the State Department after he asserted that U.S. Middle East policy was based on distortion and lies.

Nevertheless, Clinton telephoned the prime minister as soon as the results came through and invited him to Washington, a visit initially scheduled for late June but then postponed to early July because of Netanyahu's delays in putting together a governing coalition. Concealing his dismay, Clinton said first that his administration would "give the new prime minister a chance to put his government together and develop a policy." Subsequently, in the course of June, he strengthened the supportive tone of his statements, declaring that Netanyahu's pragmatism and Western values made him someone with whom the United States could have a good working relationship and urging Arab states not to condemn or place obstacles in the path of the new government, at least until its intentions regarding the peace process were evident. What was clear was that, even if major differences did emerge between the two governments, Clinton would strive to avoid a direct conflict with Netanyahu ahead of the U.S. presidential elections in November, for fear of alienating Jewish voters.

Israel and American Jews

In the period under review, ties with American Jewry were ironically less smooth than those with the administration, with many American Jewish leaders becoming increasingly vocal in their opposition to the Rabin- and Peres-led peace process. An American Jewish Committee poll published in September 1995 showed that support for the process among American Jews had slumped to 68 percent, from 84 percent two years earlier. Just over half of American Jews favored relinquishing part of the Golan in exchange for peace with Syria; just 5 percent supported relinquishing the entire Heights.

During a visit to Washington that same month—for the signing of the Oslo II accords—Rabin used a meeting with Jewish organizational leaders and newspaper editors to lash out at right-wing Jewish groups for undermining the process
and for lobbying against the continued flow of U.S. aid to the Palestinians. He also attacked mainstream groups for not doing enough to support Israel financially. When Rabin subsequently recognized how dismayed American Jews and their leaders were by his unplanned outburst, he planned to try and improve relations when he addressed the Council of Jewish Federations’ General Assembly in Boston in early November. He was never to make that trip.

Another American Jewish Committee survey, carried out in January 1996, found 25 percent of American Jews saying they felt “very close” to Israel, and another 45 percent “fairly close.” At the same time, the poll revealed a lack of awareness of basic Israeli current affairs: while 83 percent said they followed the news from Israel somewhat or very closely, 53 percent were not sure whether Peres and Netanyahu were in the same party or not.

Although millions of dollars of American Jewish donations flowed into the various party coffers ahead of the May Israeli elections, the major independent Jewish groups were careful not to ally themselves openly with either prime-ministerial candidate. Nevertheless, both Malcolm Hoenlein, executive director of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and the leadership of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Israel lobby, were perceived as being half-hearted supporters of the Oslo process and somewhat Likud-leaning. With Netanyahu in power, AIPAC was likely to play a more central role in Israeli-U.S. relations than the peripheral part to which it was consigned under the Rabin and Peres governments.

Other Foreign Relations

Relations with Turkey were strengthened during the period under review, despite the rise there of Islamic political power. Turkey’s deputy chief of staff, Cevik Bir, visited in February 1996, and President Suleiman Demirel visited in March—the first-ever visit by a Turkish president to the Jewish state. The Israeli deputy chief of staff, Matan Vilnai, and the state president, Ezer Weizman, both reciprocated in early summer. February 1996 saw the signing of a strategic military cooperation agreement that brought the two countries unprecedentedly close. Israel agreed to upgrade Turkish fighter planes and to help Turkey with military training, to conduct joint air maneuvers, to establish security-intelligence consultation frameworks, and to conduct reciprocal visits at the deputy-chief-of-staff level on a regular basis. Both air forces would be allowed to use each other’s air space, and joint army and navy exercises were envisioned.

Further afield, although ties with the Muslim Asian countries of Indonesia and Malaysia remained moribund on the diplomatic level, they were warmed by little-noticed interfaith contacts. Leading Israeli rabbis held secret talks with Muslim leaders—including Indonesia’s foremost Muslim cleric, Abdulrahman Wahid, head of the country’s central Muslim authority, Nadlatul al-Ulema—on interfaith issues, with quiet government encouragement.

Most prominent visitors to Israel were asked by the government to avoid vis-
ining Palestinian leaders at the PLO’s Orient House headquarters in East Jerusalem. Israel asserted that political meetings in the building constituted a breach of the Oslo accords; it also wished to deny the Palestinians any pretext for asserting that Israel was giving de facto recognition to Palestinian claims to control of that part of the city. Most dignitaries accepted the Israeli demands, meeting with Arafat and his officials at alternative locations, such as Arafat’s Gaza headquarters.

Among the period’s most important visitors were South African foreign minister Alfred Nzo, who in September 1995 became the first official representative of Nelson Mandela’s government to tour Israel. (Mandela was himself scheduled to visit in April 1996, but postponed the trip because of its proximity to the Israeli elections.) Spanish prime minister Felipe Gonzalez also visited in September, while Japanese prime minister Tomichi Murayama made a two-day visit that was the first ever by a Japanese premier. He pledged $200 million in new aid for the Palestinians and also announced plans for a Japanese export and trade office in Israel to boost economic ties.

In late November, Peres signed an accord with the European Union (EU) in Brussels eliminating customs duties on all Israeli-EU two-way trade and expanding free-trade arrangements to improve Israeli access to private and public EU markets. This accord was designed to redress the imbalance in Israeli-EU trade: in 1995, Israel had a massive $6.6-billion deficit in trade with the community.

Foreign Minister Ehud Barak flew to Russia in March 1996 for talks with newly appointed foreign minister Yevgeni Primakov, regarded as an Arabist with extensive contacts in the Arab world. On the agenda was Israeli opposition to Moscow’s involvement in Iran’s nuclear facility at Boshir, where Russian technicians were helping build a light-water reactor, earning Russia $1 billion in hard foreign currency. Encouragingly for Israel, which feared a new series of pro-Arab Russian foreign policy initiatives, Primakov sent a condolence message to Israel in February, soon after his appointment, condemning the Hamas suicide bombings. Less encouragingly, the run-up to the Russian elections in the summer saw various bizarre policy moves against the Jewish Agency’s offices in Russia, including short-term enforced office closures and a formal if largely unimplemented ban on all agency operations. But these orders were rescinded, and President Boris Yeltsin was far too preoccupied with his own reelection campaign to involve himself actively in the Middle East, making time only to send a cable of congratulation to Netanyahu in early June, urging a continuation of the peace process.

A tense moment in relations between Israel and both South Africa and Nigeria occurred in May, after the Israeli Foreign Ministry indicated it had information that both countries were allowing Hezbollah to operate training bases inside their territory. The respective ambassadors, Malcolm Ferguson and Ignatius Olisemeka, were summoned to the ministry in Jerusalem and told of Israel’s deep concern over the issue. Both men strongly denied the claims.

In the summer of 1995, in deference to an American request, Israel rejected an
approach by Cuba to establish diplomatic relations. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia did establish formal ties in December and was set to open an embassy in late summer 1996.

DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

Defense

Though widely respected as a talented, authoritative, and reliable chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Amnon Lipkin-Shahak drew heavy political fire in the period under review from some right-wing politicians angered by his ongoing negotiating role in the peace process, which they saw as effectively taking the army into the forbidden territory of partisan politics. Having served as the key negotiator with his Palestinian counterpart, Nabil Shaath, over the Gaza-Jericho pullback while still deputy chief of staff in 1993, Shahak, now in the top job, went to Washington in August 1995 for talks with Syria’s top general, Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi. Following the Rabin government’s policy guidelines but also bringing his own security expertise into play, Shahak insisted that in exchange for any territorial compromise on the Golan Heights, Israel would have to receive watertight security arrangements, including land-based early warning systems on the strategic range. That demand proved unacceptable in Damascus, and although negotiations proceeded on a stop-start basis for several more months, no breakthroughs were achieved.

Meanwhile, Shahak focused much of the army’s attention and resources on intelligence-gathering, in an effort to counter the threat of other regional states acquiring nuclear capability. The main focus, inevitably, was Iran, and a spate of foreign media reports in late 1995 suggested that the IDF was exploring the possibility of an air strike against Teheran’s nuclear facilities, similar to the bombing raid that devastated Iraq’s nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1981.

The consensus in Israeli military intelligence was that Iran could well become a nuclear power within eight to ten years. And worryingly, David Ivri, director-general of the Defense Ministry, noted in March 1996 that, while “there are serious efforts to deny Teheran a nuclear capability . . . I’m not sure it’s possible. They will have access to technologies and things could happen that we don’t know about — on the black market or under-the-table transfers of technology and even real nuclear parts.”

Combating the possibility of a nightmarish surprise missile attack — conventional or unconventional — emerged as a major focus of Israel’s military and strategic planners. The assumption was that enemy missile salvos would initially be aimed at air force bases, troop mobilization centers, and civilian targets, in an attempt to paralyze the army’s offensive capacity and cause panic and chaos among the civilian population. Thus a missile defense system was vital. The an-
swer remained the Arrow project, an antimissile missile which military planners announced could well be operational in a limited form by 1998, and which, if successful, would intercept incoming missiles and enable Israel to launch retaliatory strikes. The Arrow, whose estimated price tag was put at anywhere from $1.3 billion to $10 billion (funded mainly by the United States), completed a successful mid-February test flight off the Mediterranean coast and was scheduled for a first interception flight later in the summer.

On the home front, one of Shahak's main battles was to reconcile a surfeit of recruits with the need for an increasingly lean, effective, and highly motivated fighting force. Whereas for years the troop-starved IDF grabbed every able-bodied recruit it could lay its hands on, the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union and the baby boom after the 1973 Yom Kippur War created a manpower surplus.

Close Shahak aides said the chief of staff would ultimately want to abolish conscription, instead establishing an elite fighting force that would take only the fittest and smartest. But with that revolutionary reshaping still a long way off, plans were being hatched to send new recruits directly into the police force rather than the army, to reduce the length of male and female service, and to have regular soldiers take over some of the duties of reservists and so cut down on annual reserve duty.

As a result of the manpower surplus, reluctant recruits were finding it easier to obtain a military discharge. Senior officers admitted privately that they were concerned about a drop in troop motivation—volunteerism for elite units was said to be declining, and the poor performance of some soldiers in clashes with Hezbollah gunmen in Lebanon led to assertions by some commentators that the army was going soft and losing its edge.

Apart from the ongoing semi-war in Lebanon and continued deployment in those areas of the West Bank and Gaza not under Yasir Arafat's control, the army was called upon to deal ever more intensively with internal security, especially after the four Hamas suicide bombings in spring 1996. Thousands of soldiers were deployed at roadblocks to enforce the closure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip announced by Peres as a result of the bombings; still more were stationed at bus stops, shopping malls, and vacation sites around the country, in an effort to detect and deter more human bombs. In Jerusalem, for several months after the blasts, the city took on the look of a military fortress, with pairs of soldier stationed at most of the capital's bus stops.

In February the army also began work on the government's "separation" plan, designed ultimately to cut off the West Bank from Israel by erecting a security fence between Kfar Saba and the Palestinian town of Qalqilya, previously separated by a two-lane road and an orchard. Throughout the spring, the army also brought in bulldozers to erect huge banks of earth, blocking paths used by Palestinians to enter Israel undetected from the West Bank.

Benjamin Netanyahu had promised during his election campaign that he would
surprise everyone with his choice of defense minister. But when it came to decision time, few were taken aback by his appointment of Likud newcomer Yitzhak Mordechai to the top defense spot. Mordechai's appointment, however, immediately raised speculation about the tensions it might engender among the military's top brass, especially because of his already strained relations with the IDF's chief of staff.

Just over a year before Mordechai's appointment in June 1996, he was passed over for the position of deputy chief by then-chief of staff Amnon Shahak; Shahak preferred Matan Vilnai, then head of the Southern Command. An embittered Mordechai, who was serving as the IDF's Northern Command chief, stalked away from the army. After a brief flirtation with Labor, he joined the Likud and astounded party insiders when he came in first in the Likud's primaries in late April.

Some military commentators questioned the wisdom of appointing an ex-general as defense minister so soon after he had hung up his uniform. Others pondered the personal tensions it would spawn, with both Shahak and Vilnai, hitherto perceived as Shahak's natural successor.

Mordechai's ministerial powers, however, seemed likely to be considerably more limited than those of his predecessors. Netanyahu chose to set up a Council for National Security to oversee all strategic planning and indeed slighted Mordechai by appointing David Ivri, the Defense Ministry director-general and former air force chief, to head that new council, without first consulting his new defense minister. The restructuring, analysts pointed out, meant that Mordechai's only real area of responsibility would be the army itself, thereby increasing the potential for troublesome relations with the generals. "Mordechai," said one military observer, "will really be a kind of super-Chief of Staff." In the event, however, the National Security Council was abandoned before it ever even convened.

Religion

The rise of Orthodox political power in the May 29 elections immediately plunged secular-religious relations into troubled waters, with the religious politicians presenting a lengthy list of demands as coalition horse trading got under way. These included the closing of shopping malls and thousands of Jewish businesses on the Sabbath, the shutting down of all Jewish-owned shops that sold pork products, the closing of roads that ran through predominantly religious neighborhoods—such as Bar-Ilan Boulevard in Jerusalem—and the expunging of any recognition of gay rights from legislation. Furthermore, the religious politicians demanded that archaeologists be forced to adhere to stricter guidelines in order to safeguard the sanctity of Jewish bones, insisted that Reform conversions be clearly outlawed, and committed themselves to curbing the liberal activism of the Supreme Court and to insuring that there was no further constitutional legislation.
One demand, later struck from the list, was that the McDonald's outlet in Jerusalem be shut down because of its nonkosher menu. Secular demonstrators protesting religious coercion gathered outside the Knesset as the coalition negotiations progressed inside.

The new religious ministers wasted no time in making their intentions clear. The day the government was sworn in, June 18, newly appointed minister of labor and social welfare Eli Yishai, of Shas, said that he would strictly enforce the law prohibiting factories and shops from operating on the Sabbath. "There is no doubt that we will enforce the law," Yishai promised. The new minister of transport, Yitzhak Levy, of the National Religious Party, said he would strictly apply the law barring public transport before the end of the Sabbath, a move that would mean no buses could start running on summer Saturday nights until after 9 P.M. And United Torah Judaism's Meir Porush, deputy minister of housing, said he would issue an order to stop all building connected to his ministry in areas where graves were uncovered, until a halakhic solution was found. "It is possible to find solutions if there is good will," he said. "If halakhic solutions are not found, the projects will be changed, in the same way as roads are rerouted so that a 100-year-old tree does not have to be uprooted."

OTHER MATTERS

For the Reform and Masorti (Conservative) movements, the battles over conversion, marriage, and representation on religious councils continued. Despite several court decisions over the years—the last was on January 1, 1996—obliging religious councils to include Reform and Masorti members, there was little progress over the period under review, with the councils often employing delaying tactics to block the court ruling. In some towns and cities, the religious councils, responsible for a myriad of religious services including ritual baths, kashrut supervision, and the building of synagogues, simply did not hold new elections, in an effort to circumvent the court decisions.

The Reform movement did have some success. A court ruling in mid-1995 determined that the Religious Affairs Ministry had to allocate subsidies for students at the Reform's Hebrew Union College in the same way as it did for yeshivah students. The Reform institution was allocated $100,000 a year; still, movement leaders later complained that the Religious Ministry had not provided the full sum.

There were also signs of slow but steady growth in the country's non-Orthodox community. The number of marriages celebrated in non-Orthodox synagogues in 1995 remained tiny at 200, but that was double the previous year's figure. The number of bar mitzvahs at Reform and Masorti synagogues was also up, with reservations often having to be made a year in advance.

Nevertheless, a new law (Basic Law: Religious Matters), which passed a preliminary vote in the Knesset in January, threatened to block further non-Orthodox
inroads. The law stipulated that all legislation, regulations, or customs were only valid if they did not contradict the Jewish character of the state and did not offend religious sensibilities, and that they could be struck down if they limited or violated other basic freedoms. What is more, the Chief Rabbinate was cited as the authority defining Jewish law and tradition, a move that Reform leaders warned would turn it into a “super authority” on all legislation and enable circumvention of court decisions.

On the conversion front, the picture remained somewhat unclear. In November 1995, a seven-judge Supreme Court panel ruled in the case of Elaine Goldstein, who had petitioned the court to have her Reform conversion in Israel recognized. The court ruled that a requirement by the Population Registry that a person who converted to Judaism in Israel was obliged to provide a state rabbinate certificate of conversion in order to be registered as a Jew was legally groundless. But the court did not specifically deal with the issue of whether a Reform or Conservative conversion in Israel should be registered. The Knesset, the court suggested, should be left to decide whether non-Orthodox conversions in Israel should be recognized for the purposes of civil registration. In February 1996, a vote on a preliminary reading of a bill prepared by religious MKs and aimed at blocking the recognition of Reform and Masorti conversions was postponed.

Yet it was not only the religious who tried to block non-Orthodox conversion. Labor leader and interior minister Haim Ramon (whose ministry oversaw the Population Registry) shocked a group of 50 rabbis from ARZA, the Zionist arm of the Reform movement, when he informed them in January 1996 that he would refuse to register Goldstein. Justifying his move largely on political grounds, Ramon said that such a move would alienate the religious parties and cost Shimon Peres support in the prime-ministerial race. “I’m not willing,” he said, “because of your Reform conversions, to see Binyamin Netanyahu come to power and my son get sent to Gaza and be killed.”

The possibility of secular burial moved a few steps closer to realization in 1996. In February the Knesset Law Committee approved a bill legislating secular burials for first reading. The law would require the Religious Ministry to allocate land for non-Orthodox burials either in existing cemeteries or in new ones. Religious Affairs Minister Shimon Shetreet also announced that four sites for alternative burial had been located—in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Beer-sheba—and that five kibbutzim were willing to set up alternative burial societies. Four more licenses for private organizations to perform non-Orthodox burials, the minister said, would also be granted.

Pressure for alternative burial mounted further in 1995–96, as the number of non-Jews who moved to Israel as part of the Russian immigration grew. In June 1996, for instance, there was a major public outcry when a rabbi in the Negev development town of Sderot refused to bury Dor Buhadana, a Russian immigrant child whose father was Jewish but whose mother was not.

Despite the religious parties’ expanded power, it emerged in June that Jerusalem
might not be far off from its first non-Orthodox burial. Plans for a new area to be added to the Har Hamenuhot Cemetery in Givat Shaul were being reviewed. And, a few months earlier, work on an “alternative” cemetery in Beersheba got under way.

Marriage remained firmly the preserve of the Orthodox establishment, even though pressure for civil marriage increased with the rise in the number of Russian immigrants unable to marry because they could not prove their Jewishness to the satisfaction of the rabbinate. Natan Sharansky’s Yisrael B’Aliyah Party included in its platform a demand for “alternative” marriage arrangements that would solve the immigrants’ dilemma, but did not call directly for the institution of civil marriage or for any other non-Orthodox solution. A bill initiated by Meretz MK Benny Temkin, which would have obliged the state to compensate couples forced to marry abroad because the Chief Rabbinate refused to marry them for halakhic reasons, was struck down in a preliminary reading in February.

Figures released in March by Hemdat, the Council for Freedom of Science, Religion and Culture in Israel, revealed that almost 20 percent of couples marrying annually did not go through the Chief Rabbinate, preferring alternatives like civil marriage in Cyprus, proxy marriages in Paraguay, or a marital agreement with a lawyer.

The Supreme Court

The rise of the religious parties in the May 1996 elections set the stage for an ongoing tussle for primacy between the Knesset and the Supreme Court. Under Aharon Barak, the president of the Supreme Court, the court had taken an increasingly activist stance, with Barak trying to establish the court’s right to judicial review—essentially to rule on the validity of Knesset legislation—as well as passing various precedent-setting civil-rights decisions, which served to boost the rights of homosexuals, the status of non-Orthodox Judaism, and more. Knesset members from some of the religious parties had opposed Barak’s appointment to the post a year earlier and were gearing up to draft legislation that would circumvent the court.

Barak, who was 59 when appointed in August 1995, had taken over from Meir Shamgar, whom he had previously served as deputy. During his 17 years on the Supreme Court, he had established a reputation as an activist and a liberal. His rise had been extraordinarily rapid (his youthful appointment meant he had a possible 11 years in the top position, until mandatory retirement at 70), reflecting his widely respected legal acumen. Immigrating to Israel as a child from Kovno in 1947, he was appointed dean of the Hebrew University Law Faculty at age 38, and served as attorney-general soon after. He held that job, memorably, during Rabin’s mid-1970s first term as prime minister. It was he who pressed charges of financial misconduct that led to the imprisonment of Asher Yadlin, who was set
to become governor of the Bank of Israel; he too who oversaw an investigation of alleged financial wrongdoing against Housing Minister Avraham Ofer, who subsequently committed suicide; and he again who elected to press criminal charges against Leah Rabin for violating a regulation barring Israelis from holding bank accounts abroad. Those charges led Rabin to step down as prime minister in 1977, and the sense of establishment corruption that prevailed helped the Likud's Menachem Begin win that year's general elections. Begin appointed Barak as legal adviser to the Israeli delegation at the Camp David negotiations with Egypt, and from there, aged 42, he moved on to the Supreme Court.

A high-profile figure on the bench, Barak was accused by some left-wing critics of abandoning his liberalism when it came to the Palestinians, specifically for his decision not to overturn the Rabin-ordered 1992 deportation of 400 alleged Islamic activists to south Lebanon. Few quibbled with his domestic political propriety, however, in some notable judgments: blocking Yossi Ginossar's appointment as Housing Ministry director-general in 1993 because of the ex-Shin Bet official's involvement in perjury scandals; forcing Shas Party leader Aryeh Deri to resign as interior minister, also in 1993, while he faced corruption charges; and ordering an investigation into alleged financial misconduct by national police chief Rafi Peled in 1994, overruling the attorney-general and prompting Peled's resignation.

Rabin was, not surprisingly, unhappy at Barak's elevation to the court presidency but made no attempt to intervene. Deri's Shas did try futilely to block him, proclaiming him antireligious on the strength of his presence on one court panel that overturned a government ban on nonkosher meat imports, and on another that provided for Reform and Conservative Jews to sit on the local government councils that supervise religious affairs.

Immigration

Ethiopian immigration overshadowed the ongoing mass immigration from the former Soviet Union, largely because of a scandal over Ethiopian blood donations. In January 1996 it emerged that the national blood bank had been maintaining a policy of routinely and secretly disposing of blood donations made by Ethiopians, on the assumption that they constituted a high-risk AIDS group. An exposé of this policy, published by the daily Ma'ariv, sparked one of the fiercest demonstrations ever seen outside the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem. Thousands of incensed Ethiopians pelted police with rocks, bottles, and iron bars. Hopelessly outnumbered, the police used intifada-like methods to quell the demonstration, firing tear gas and rubber bullets at the crowd.

In truth, the demonstration was the product of more than the insulting blood fiasco. Many of the 56,000 Ethiopians in Israel, experts said, felt isolated and alienated from Israeli society and harbored deep grievances about the way the government and the country's religious authorities had treated them. In an at-
tempt to limit the damage, Prime Minister Shimon Peres moved quickly to appoint a special committee to investigate the blood matter as well as other Ethiopian grievances, including the continuing refusal of many Orthodox rabbis to marry Ethiopians who had not undergone "symbolic conversion," and the educational failures that left Ethiopian youth far short of Israeli standards. However, Peres subsequently narrowed the mandate given the committee, headed by former president Yitzhak Navon, restricting its work to the blood donation issue alone.

Possibly the most telling area in which Ethiopian disaffection emerged was in the army. While the first crop of Ethiopian officers were celebrated by the community, and while 96 percent (1,500) of the community's youngsters eligible for conscription continued to serve—as opposed to 85 percent in the general population—their eagerness to join combat units, while still high, was dropping. The first cases emerged of draft dodging within this sector, and an increasing number of Ethiopian conscripts chose to serve in noncombat units. A series of suicides among Ethiopian recruits further eroded the army's standing in the eyes of this population.

On the education front, Ethiopians were still being filtered into separate classes, meant to help them advance but said by experts to stifle their integration. There was positive news on the housing front: the majority of Ethiopians who arrived in Operation Solomon in 1991, helped in part by large mortgages from the Absorption Ministry, had moved out of the mobile-home camps they were placed in after arrival. However, several hundred families and singles still languished in these camps.

Immigration from the former Soviet Union was down in 1995 and 1996, with the 64,000 immigrants who arrived in 1995 representing a 6-percent drop compared with the previous year. By June 1, 1996, another 22,525 immigrants had arrived, a sign that the annual Russian immigration rate was continuing to fall. As of this date, the total number of Russians who had arrived since the mass immigration wave began in 1989 was over 630,000.

The assertions, largely by the religious parties, of a high number of non-Jews among the immigrants, continued to make headlines. In June 1995 Israeli officials in Russia revealed that they had come across thousands of cases in which non-Jews from the former Soviet Union were using forged documents that attested to their Judaism, to try to immigrate to Israel. Forged birth certificates registering their owners as Jewish were selling for $800 on the black market in Moscow. In December Absorption Minister Yair Tzaban revealed that the number of non-Jews among the immigrants was around 10 percent, much lower than previously published figures, which had put the number at around one-quarter. Tzaban also announced that the number of mixed-marriage couples immigrating to Israel had dropped as a result of the difficulties connected to burying non-Jewish partners who died in Israel.

While housing problems eased for the Russians—70 percent had purchased
apartments by the end of 1995 — the issue of employment remained a sore point. While the national unemployment figure stood at about 6 percent in March, almost 10 percent of the immigrants were unemployed. Just as vexing for the immigrants was the fact that in March, a full third of those who had found jobs were not working in their chosen professions — many of these doctors, lawyers, and engineers. The immigrants also remained critical of the country’s educational system, demanding stricter discipline and higher standards from mathematics and science teachers. They pointed to the 24-percent school dropout rate among immigrant students — as opposed to a 12-percent national rate — as another failure of the country’s school system.

The overall number of immigrants to Israel in 1995 was 75,400. While the majority were from the former Soviet Union, there were 4,100 immigrants from North America, the same number from Europe, 1,200 from Asian countries, and about 1,800 from Africa. The total number of immigrants to the state since its inception crossed the two-and-a-half-million mark in October.

Economic Developments

Taking over at the Finance Ministry on June 19, 1996, the newly appointed Dan Meridor vowed to bring down inflation and reduce the budget and current account deficits. Although a senior Likud figure, Meridor headed a ministry that looked set to be somewhat reduced, because Netanyahu also appointed the Bank of Israel governor, Jacob Frenkel, to head a new economic council. But that council was never to be convened.

Meridor inherited an economy in fundamentally good shape, boosted by the peace process, with annual growth in 1995 of 6.9 percent and a prediction of 5-percent growth for 1996. Gross Domestic Product was 141 billion shekels in 1995, a small rise on 1994’s 132 billion. Growth in the business sector was 8.3 percent year on year, with the building and construction sector contributing 1.2 percent of that figure. Israel’s trading deficit was a growing problem, however, with 1995 imports totaling $28,034 billion and exports $17,879 billion — a deficit of $10,155 billion, which represented an increase of almost $3 billion on 1994.

Inflation in 1995 was less of a problem than it had been in 1994 — 8.1 percent for the year, down from 1994’s 14.5 percent. But late 1995 signs of a resurgence proved all too accurate in 1996, and by May, monthly increases in the cost-of-living index of well in excess of 1 percent had pushed the annual inflation forecast up to some 15 percent. Election economics, together with old factors such as surging housing prices, increases in fruit and vegetable prices, and rising private consumption, were the key factors in the rise.

Unemployment figures continued to cheer. The jobless rate had slipped gradually down from 11.2 percent in 1992, to 10 percent in 1993, and 7.8 percent in 1994, reaching 6.2 percent at the end of 1995, and continuing at about that level through the first months of 1996.
In the light of 1995 figures showing private consumption roaring up by 7.1 percent overall, and 4.4 percent per capita, Meridor predicted a series of belt-tightening measures and adjustments to reduce the widening gap between Israeli rich and poor.

The new government was also strongly committed to privatization, with Netanyahu taking personal responsibility for privatizing what he pledged would be 50 publicly owned companies in his first four-year term. Privatization plans had withered in the last year of the Rabin-Peres administration, with partial sell-offs of shares in Israel Chemicals, Bank Leumi, Bezeq communications, Zim shipping, and El Al airlines delayed, canceled, or impossibly bogged down, and plans for privatizing Israel Aircraft Industries, the Israel Electric Corporation, and Bank Hapoalim, Israel's largest financial institution, hopelessly mired.

1995 was a boom year for tourism, with arrivals totaling a record 2,523,218, a 16.4-percent increase on 1994's own record 2,166,836 arrivals. But high hopes for a new record in 1996 — raised by a 27-percent increase in the first two months of the year (363,800 arrivals) — were dented by the Hamas blasts in February and March, which prompted a wave of cancellations.

After a bad year in 1994, marking the collapse of the five-year-old bull market, and more falls in most of 1995, the Stock Exchange rallied a little in November, and by year's end, the General Share Index had risen back to the 200 mark. In the year overall, the General Index rose 14 percent, the Variables Index 20.2 percent, the Maof (mixed) Index 23.1 percent, and the Caram (smaller shares) Index 1.6 percent.

Israel's reliance on Palestinian workers continued to decline in the period under review, as employers took on foreign workers to replace Palestinians kept out of sovereign Israel by long-term closure orders imposed for security reasons. The March 1996 Dizengoff Center blast prompted the most stringent closure yet, since the bomber had been smuggled into Israel from the Gaza Strip hiding in a truck of vegetables. Whereas some 120,000 Palestinians had once found regular work inside Israel, that number had declined to 58,750 (with perhaps another 20,000 working illegally) by the end of 1995, and fell further in the first half of 1996, when the West Bank and Gaza were closed off for long weeks around the time of the suicide bombings and the elections. Consequently, the number of foreign nationals from Eastern Europe and the Far East continued to grow, from almost 60,000 at the end of 1994 to more than 73,000 by the end of 1995 and near 100,000 by late spring of 1996.

The state budget for 1996, approved by the Knesset on December 29, 1995, was 172,772 billion shekels.

Communications Satellite

Just before 5 A.M. on May 16, 1996, Israel's Amos 1 communications satellite was successfully launched from the European Space Agency (ESA) site in Kourou,
French Guyana, on the northeast coast of South America. Amos 1, Israel's first commercial satellite, cost $120 million and was taken into orbit by the ESA Ariane-4 rocket. The launch itself cost a further $30 million.

The 996-kilogram satellite, which had a ten-year life span and was developed and produced by Israel Aircraft Industries, was positioned at 36,000 kilometers above the west coast of Africa and focused on the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Amos 1 was designed to enable improved cable, phone, cellular phone, and on-line data links. State, commercial, and cable TV and the Bezeq telecommunications conglomerate all purchased services provided by the satellite. At the end of June, advanced negotiations were under way with Hungary, and several unnamed Arab states had also expressed interest in using some of the services Amos offered.

Peres, who approved the satellite project when it was initiated in 1988, said the Amos launch had propelled Israel "to a new era in communications," joining just eight other nations capable of developing and producing communications satellites.

**Long-Range Development**

Take away the unpopulated Negev desert and Israel was the world's most densely populated developed country at the end of 1995—more cramped even than the world's most crowded Western country, the Netherlands. With a population ballooning at nearly 3 percent a year, a high birthrate, and ongoing immigration from the former Soviet Union, it had become evident that Israel was running out of space. Adding to the squeeze were the country's clogged roads and the greater demand for army training space as Israel pulled out of the West Bank.

With this problem in mind, the first long-term master plan in 40 years for Israel's development was drawn up and presented in March 1996. Titled "Israel 2020," the plan—funded by the government and devised by a group of 50 architects, academics, and environmental planners—aimed to set development trends well into the next century. If the present course of Israel's development was not altered, project head Adam Mazor predicted, the result would be "congestion, dwindling natural resources, damage to environmental quality, and spatial and social conflicts."

Tiered cemeteries, subterranean shopping malls, and Israeli air planes flying practice runs in Jordanian airspace were just a few of the seemingly bizarre space-saving suggestions that planners mentioned. In Jerusalem, they seemed somewhat less outlandish, where city officials announced in January that the capital had less than a year to go before it ran out of burial space.

In an attempt to address the space problems, most planners were talking of the need to build up, especially in the country's center. In Tel Aviv, where there was only a sprinkling of towers, several new ones, including the Peace Center—three 40-story office towers—were being built. Planners referred to the phenomenon...
as the "Manhattanization" of Tel Aviv, a process that was being accelerated by the peace process and the subsequent growing demand for office space in Tel Aviv as a number of multinationals began to invade Israel.

The land shortage meant spiraling housing prices. At the beginning of 1996 it was almost impossible to find a three-room apartment in an average Jerusalem neighborhood for less than $200,000, or $250,000 in Tel Aviv. Part of the problem, experts agreed, was the government's land policy, whereby the country's scarcest resource was turned over to blind market forces. After the Israel Lands Authority allowed debt-ridden kibbutzim and moshavim in the center of the country to sell developers their rights to state-owned agricultural land, the lots were rezoned for residential building. The result: While developers made millions, low-density single-family homes and townhouses filled up scarce land resources in the center of the country.

This urban sprawl, planners warned, would mean more cars, more roads, and ultimately more traffic jams. Yet, in stark contrast to the Labor government's ambitious road-building program, which continued into 1996, there was little investment in the country's rail system, which could have been a major space-saver and helped to decongest the roads. Work, however, did get under way on another land-gobbler toward the end of 1995 — the Trans-Israel Highway, an eight-lane superhighway to run 300 kilometers (almost 190 miles), starting at Beersheba in the south and forking out to Rosh Hanikrah and Rosh Pinah in the north. Planned as a privately built toll road, Highway 6 would consume a minimum of 9,000 dunams (2,250 acres) in the center of the country.

The bottom line, planners warned, was that if development trends continued apace, Israel would be paved over within 25 years. In January, Arie Shachar, professor of urban geography and planning at the Floersheimer Institute for Policy Studies, commented that "the criteria in future planning decisions will be how much land a project requires and not just how much money it will bring in for the economy." For Israel, he stated, "land is now an even more scarce resource than water. You can desalinate the sea. Once the land is gone, it can't be reproduced."

The Dinitz Trial

The two-year trial of former Jewish Agency chairman Simcha Dinitz came to an end on April 15, 1996, when he was found guilty of fraud and breach of public trust by a Jerusalem district court. While Dinitz escaped a prison sentence, he was issued a 40,000-shekel ($12,000) fine for making private purchases on a Jewish Agency credit card without reimbursing the organization.

Dinitz, 67, was found guilty of charging $6,700 worth of personal items to the agency using a credit card from the Syms clothing store in New York. But he was cleared of another allegation, that he had misused the American Express card issued to him by the agency. According to the charge sheet, Dinitz had not reimbursed the agency for $15,400 of personal purchases he clocked up on the
American Express card, but the court ruled that it was the responsibility of the agency’s accountants to deduct these sums from Dinitz’s salary. The state announced that it would appeal Dinitz’s sentence, which it considered too lenient, as well as his acquittal on the American Express charge. Dinitz was also appealing his conviction.

While Judge Shalom Brenner said that a stricter standard should be applied in Dinitz’s case, because he is “one of the most senior civil servants ever to be convicted of fraud and breach of trust in Israel, if not the most senior,” he decided not to impose a jail sentence because of Dinitz’s contribution to the state. He noted the ex-chairman’s crucial role in organizing the American military airlift during the Yom Kippur War, when he was Israel’s ambassador to the United States, as well as his role in the mass Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union.

Dinitz was also supported by an impressive list of character witnesses, which included former Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek, former justice minister Haim Zadok, former president Yitzhak Navon, and former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger.

One hour after Dinitz was convicted, the trial began of former Jewish Agency treasurer Meir Shetreet. Shetreet, a Likud Knesset member, was also charged with making personal purchases on an agency credit card, to the value of some $20,000. He pleaded not guilty.

The Media

The media did not have an easy time in 1996. The election campaign thrust the press, radio, and television into the spotlight and often turned them into a target for attack, especially from the right, which accused the media of being biased in favor of Shimon Peres and the left. While Netanyahu did not make the accusations himself, he allowed his colleagues to launch a fierce attack on the media. Likud MK and Communications Minister Limor Livnat accused journalists of allowing their personal opinions to color their reporting. She alleged that they had deliberately refrained from reporting that Netanyahu had outperformed Peres in their late-May television debate, for fear it would harm Peres’s chances. Only after the election, she said, did the press admit that the new prime minister had “won by a knockout.”

After the election, Livnat continued vociferously to champion Netanyahu’s pre-election pledge to privatize the Israel Broadcasting Authority and essentially do away with public broadcasting in Israel, a move that was seen by some as a genuine part of the new government’s liberalization plans but by others as an attempt by the right to punish the media. In early June, Livnat also said that she did not rule out bringing foreign investors into the Israeli media market, lending credence to reports that media baron Rupert Murdoch, a close friend of Netanyahu, might be one of the foreign investors the new prime minister had pledged to bring to Israel if he won. Alarmed media experts immediately came to the defense of Is-
rael TV, arguing that only a public channel that was not dependent on private economic interests could protect the free flow of information to the public.

The year was marked not only by attacks on the media, but also by battles within the media — especially between the state-run Israel Television or Channel 1 and Israel's only commercial station, Channel 2. Channel 2 continued to win viewers from Channel 1 with an American-style menu of game and talk shows. A survey conducted in November 1995 revealed that Channel 2 was regularly attracting twice as many viewers as Channel 1.

Experts pointed to the night of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination on November 4 as a defining moment in the battle between the two stations. Channel 2, with its much younger and fresher staff, presented gripping coverage of the hours after the assassination; in the days after the murder it proceeded to scoop the state-run channel by landing interviews with leading personalities and members of the Rabin family. The first post-assassination interviews with Leah Rabin, the slain prime minister's grandchildren, and acting prime minister Shimon Peres were all on Channel 2. So was the only known live footage of the assassination, which Channel 2, in tandem with the daily *Yediot Aharonot*, purchased from an amateur cameraman for $330,000.

The trials of senior *Yediot* and *Ma'ariv* members involved in a 1994 bugging scandal began and were still in progress at the end of June 1996. *Ma'ariv* owner Ofer Nimrodi and *Yediot* editor Moshe Vardi were both on trial for their involvement in the bugging of each other's newspapers and of their own staffs.

**Sports**

The year was once again a largely inauspicious one for Israeli sports in the international arena, with the country's leading soccer clubs being knocked out in the first round of European competition, and Israel's perennial basketball champions, Maccabi Tel Aviv, failing dismally to make the playoffs of the European championships.

It was left largely to the youth to bring Israel some sporting accolades, with the country's national youth soccer team beating world powers like Italy, Germany, and England to reach the semifinals of the spring European youth championships before bowing out 1–0 to France. But they did bring home the bronze, beating Greece 2–1 in the playoff for third and fourth spots.

The other sporting glimmer was provided by Israel's male swimmers, who garnered 11 medals in European meets in February and shattered 23 Israeli records in the process. Israel's leading swimmer, 24-year-old Yoav Bruk, who pulled off the country's best-ever achievement in the pool when he placed sixth in the 50-meter sprint final at the world championships in Rome in the summer of 1995, was considered Israel's best chance in the swim events at the Atlanta Olympic Games. It was hoped he would become the first-ever Israeli swimmer to reach an Olympic final.
In June it was announced that Israel's Olympic team would comprise 25 or 26 athletes representing 10 different sports—track-and-field, swimming, judo, wrestling, boxing, fencing, shooting, weight lifting, sailing, and windsurfing. Israel's medal hopes rested largely with five athletes. Two immigrants were expected to compete for medals—marksman Boris Polak from Alma Ata in Kazakhstan, a past world champion in the Olympic air rifle event; and wrestler Gotcha Tzitzuashvili, a Georgian immigrant, who won the silver medal at the world championships in 1996. Also expected to be in with medal chances were the country's first-ever Olympic medalists—judoists Yael Arad and Oren Smadja, who picked up silver and bronze, respectively, at the Barcelona Games in 1992—and windsurfer Gal Friedman, who placed second in the world championships in 1996.

Hopes that the athletes who had arrived in Israel as part of the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union would catapult Israel into the world arena continued to wane. While many immigrant athletes were easily good enough to vanquish all local competition, they were not good enough to do the same on the world stage. The best performance by an immigrant athlete came in June, when high-jumper Konstantin Matusevic won the gold medal at a competition in Italy, leaping an impressive 2.34 meters and smashing the Israeli record in the process.

The major problem for Israel's athletes remained a lack of funding and a scarcity of adequate facilities. While experts estimated that 200 million shekels a year ($66 million) was required to transform Israel into an Olympic force, the budget of the Israel Olympic Committee was 30 million shekels ($10 million), spread over four years. At the opening of the "Olympic Year" in July 1995, the government pledged a further five million shekels, which sports officials laughed off as "too little, too late."

While Maccabi Tel Aviv teams won both the national soccer and basketball titles, it was the second-division Hapoel Taibeh soccer team that provided most of the season's drama. In March, Taibeh became the first Arab team ever to win promotion to the country's top soccer league, by winning the second division. Taibeh—which also had Jewish players—stirred local Arab patriotism, drawing support not just from among the 30,000 residents in the town north of Tel Aviv, but from all around the Arab sector.

It was off the field, though, where most of the intriguing action was taking place. In October 1995, a major sports betting scandal broke, when it emerged that millions of shekels were being wagered weekly on basketball and soccer matches, a healthy portion of it by the players themselves. Gambling was illegal in Israel, except for the national lottery or state-run soccer pools. The police initiated an investigation, and the Israel Basketball Association hired a team of private investigators to uncover those operating the illegal betting ring and the players who were placing bets. So began a parade of Israel's leading basketball and soccer stars, including the national basketball team captain, Doron Jamchee, and
the captain of Israel’s national soccer team, Nir Klinger, who filed one by one into the Petah Tikvah police station to be interrogated. But by the end of June 1996 no player had been charged and the investigation was ongoing.

Vital Statistics

Israel’s population at the end of 1995 stood at 5,619,100, of whom 4,549,500 (or 80.9 percent) were Jews, and 1,069,500 Arabs and others. That compared with 5,460,000 at the end of 1994, of whom 4,430,000 were Jews (81.1 percent). By April 1996 Israel’s population had increased to 5,650,500. The Central Bureau of Statistics put the number of Jews living in the territories at that date at some 133,500 (128,300 in the West Bank; 5,200 in Gaza), compared with 133,000 a year earlier.

Road violence, as ever, took an appalling toll: 547 people were killed on the roads in 1995, compared to 528 the previous year. As of June 20, another 251 people had lost their lives on the roads in 1996.

Personalia

Among Israeli personalities who died in the second half of 1995 were Mordechai (Motta) Gur, 65, the deputy defense minister and former chief of staff, who committed suicide while suffering from terminal cancer, on July 16. Gur had commanded the paratroop brigade that reached the Old City on June 7, 1967, and it was he who sent the famous report to his commander: “The Temple Mount is in our hands.” In 1974 he was appointed chief of staff, and as such he master-minded the 1976 Entebbe rescue. Other leading Israelis who died in 1995 were Ephraim Evron, 75, former Foreign Ministry director-general and Israeli ambassador to the United States, on July 17; Menahem Avidom, 87, Israel Prize-winning composer, on August 5; Don Patinkin, 73, rector and president of the Hebrew University, on August 7; Haim Kaufman, 60, former Likud Knesset chairman and deputy finance minister, on August 7; Meir David Loevenstein, 91, ex-Agudat Israel MK and signatory to the Declaration of Independence, on August 15; Shlomo Zalman Shragai, 95, Jerusalem’s first elected Israeli mayor (1950–52), on September 1; Benjamin Mazar, 89, Hebrew University rector and president, the archaeologist who directed post-Six Day War Temple Mount excavations, on September 8; Yosef Avidar, 89, Haganah commander, prominent IDF general, ex-ambassador, and Labor Ministry director-general, on September 13; Rabbi Yehuda Meir Getz, 71, “rabbi of the Western Wall” from 1967 to his death, on September 17; U. O. Schmelz, 77, Hebrew University demographer, on September 20; Alexander Argov, 81, Israel Prize-winning composer, on September 27; David Erlick, 86, Independence War surgeon at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem who later performed Israel’s first kidney transplant operation, on...
October 29; Yitzhak Rabin, 73, prime minister, November 4; Amos Funkenstein, 58, Jewish history scholar, on November 11; and Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neriya, 83, religious Zionist leader and settlement supporter who actively opposed the Palestinian peace process, on December 12.

Personalities who died in the first half of 1996 included Israel Eldad, 87, leader of pre-state Lehi underground and right-wing ideologue, on January 22; Rabbi Pinhas Menahem Alter, 69, leader of the Ger Hassidim and key spiritual leader of Agudat Israel, on March 7; Moshe Davis, 79, a leading figure in Conservative Judaism in the United States before making *aliyah* and founder of Hebrew University’s Institute of Contemporary Jewry, on April 10; Emile Habibi, 73, Israeli Arab writer who won a 1992 Israel Prize, an ex-MK who founded Israel’s Communist Party, on May 2; Chaim Rabin, 80, world-renowned researcher of modern and ancient Hebrew, on May 13; Haike Grossman, 76, Polish resistance leader and 20-year Mapam Knesset member, on May 26; and Ariel Rosen-Zvi, 52, dean of Tel Aviv University Law School, member of the Rabin assassination commission, and co-drafter of the planned Israeli constitution, on June 3.

David Horovitz
Peter Hirschberg
Culture in Israel

During 1994–95, the peace process created a sense of hope and liberation that encouraged artistic expression in Israel. In addition, the peace process brought a greater flow of foreign culture into the country. This activity was coupled with increased government support for the arts. Under Minister of Culture Shulamit Aloni, the culture budget for the country doubled, with particular emphasis given to libraries, local dance groups and orchestras, film production, and cultural activities for the Arab sector.

A negative development was the drainage of financial resources to large cultural institutions, like Habimah, that were struggling with long-standing debts. This support came at the expense of small and middle-sized institutions, which are often the catalysts for new creativity in the society.

The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 destroyed the unself-conscious secular celebration of the arts. Nothing could be the same after that obscene act. At first there was a vendetta against thereligious, who, whatever their political affinity, were stereotyped as conspiring with the assassin, Yigal Amir. Eventually, Israelis realized that healing must take place between the different groups in the nation, and they sought common, nonpartisan forms in which to express this solidarity.

Issues relating to Judaism and democracy were debated in symposia and conferences throughout the country. Influenced by the young people who spent long hours lighting candles and singing old Israeli songs, a CD titled Shalom Haver (Good-bye, Friend), featuring sentimental melodies that express consensual values, was released in memory of Rabin. It represented nostalgia for an earlier, putatively more unified period. This wave of nostalgia was reflected in the trend to collect Egged or Histadrut posters of the forties and fifties depicting workers or strong pioneering figures, and in the publication of Where We Were and What We Did: A Dictionary of the Fifties and Sixties, by Amnon Dankner and David Tarkover. This type of “looking back” with humor and affectionate criticism to a common past had already begun before Rabin’s assassination, emerging from a new sense of normalcy. This hankering for the “good old days” of the state, when ideological schisms were held in check by the need to focus on nation-building, included a renewed appreciation of Zionist institutions like Youth Aliyah. The film Under the Domin Tree, for example, the story of actress Gila Almagor, who was sent to a youth village when her disturbed mother was committed to a mental institution, depicts the ways in which the personnel of the youth village and the other youngsters helped her to grow and to cope with her traumatic past. Its novelty lies in giving credit to the establishment, after a
long period when government institutions were routinely scorned in the arts. Among the various cultural fields, dance and music flourished during the 1994–95 period, while interest in the theater declined. Since 1989 there had been an impressive 166-percent growth in opera attendance and 30-percent in dance, while theater attendance dropped 9 percent. A 17-percent increase in subsidies for all fields of culture brought the government subsidy of the arts to 51 percent of the expenses, in contrast to 1989 when the government subsidized 43 percent of all cultural outlays.

Jerusalem 3000

Beginning in September 1995, Israel celebrated the approximate 3,000th anniversary of King David's founding of the city of Jerusalem. Although motivated by a combination of political, public relations, and tourism goals, the yearlong event generated an outburst of cultural activity, including the creation of new works that were performed both in Israel and abroad.

The Jerusalem 3000 committee commissioned composer Ari Ben Shabtai's Magregia, whose world premiere was performed in Jerusalem by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. In the framework of Jerusalem 3000, the Jerusalem Symphony commissioned The Vision of Stone City, composed by Yinan Leef, which was performed in many countries including Poland, the Czech Republic, and Spain. It also commissioned Menachem Wissenberg's Jerusalem and performed works of the late Mordechai Setter at the prestigious Prague Spring Festival.

There were concerts featuring liturgical music of all faiths, including traditional oriental Jewish chants and Ashkenazic cantorial music, and a tribute to Shlomo Carlebach's popular folk-Hassidic music. There was much focus on musical settings of the Book of Psalms—traditionally ascribed to King David—with world premieres of Noam Sheriff's Psalms of Jerusalem and Lalo Schifrin's Psalms.

Support was also given to the visual arts in relation to the anniversary. An International Judaica Fair featured designers from all over the world, as well as from Israel, showing new works inspired by Jerusalem. A photography project commissioned 12 master photographers, including non-Israelis, to document the city. Paintings and drawings of Jerusalem scenes by artists of the past and present were exhibited at the Israel Museum, and an exhibit comparing Jerusalem with seven other capital cities of the ancient world was on display at the Bible Lands Museum.

Theater

Although drama was the dominant genre during 1994–95, the most popular plays were comedies. Israeli comedies, in particular, were preferred, though only one out of every three plays during 1994 was an original Israeli work. In the spirit of the peace process, theaters like the Jerusalem Khan attempted to integrate
Palestinian Arab actors into their productions. For the first time in the history of Arab-Israeli relations, the important Arab theater group from Jordan, Nabil and Hisham, performed in the country.

During this period the theater world was shaken by a crisis involving Habimah, the oldest of Israel's national repertory companies, which faced the threat of having to close because of overwhelming debt. Yakov Agmon, newly appointed general manager of Habimah, finally worked out a recovery plan whereby the debt would be absorbed by the government. But the episode pointed up the larger question of Habimah's role in Israel today. Cameri Theater had succeeded in attracting audiences by emphasizing sociopolitical issues: Beit Lessin featured dynamic young playwrights; the Russian-founded Gesher Theater could boast the special vision of its director, Yevgeny Aryeh. But Habimah had not been able to revitalize itself or find its special niche. Known for its great classical productions of the past, and the older giants who enhanced its stage, it was now seeking a younger image. One positive step on the road to recovery was the one-man play *A Jew in the Dark*, in which popular actor and stand-up comedian Shlomo Volozhni portrays a Marrano priest who rediscovers his Judaism and is burnt at the stake by the Inquisition.

Israeli theater continued to grapple with social and political issues, chiefly through criticism of historical and political figures. However, in the view of *Jerusalem Report* critic Calev Ben-David, Israeli theater had not developed individual, lyrical voices, "but rather remains the national debating society."

The Cameri Theater, which had made sociopolitical drama its bailiwick, presented a play about Jonathan Pollard, the American Jew who spied for Israel against the United States. Written by Moti Lerner and directed by Ilan Ronen, "Pollard—the Patriots" portrays Pollard's identity conflict as he puts his life on the line for the Jewish people and feels betrayed when the State of Israel does not give him asylum. This docudrama became a forum for political action, and the audience was requested to sign a petition in the theater lobby for Pollard's release.

An identity crisis of a different type is depicted in *Tikkun Hatzot* (Midnight Prayer), written by Amnon Levy and directed by Rami Danon. This Cameri production is a transparent account of the evolution of Aryeh Deri, the charismatic young leader of Shas, the ultra-Orthodox Sephardic party. The main character, Berke (Deri), is a Sephardic yeshivah boy who denies his own Sephardic roots in order to be accepted in the Lithuanian-type yeshivah under Rabbi Shtaat. His conflict of identities is expressed by the various names to which he answers: Berke (Yiddish), Dov (Hebrew), Div (Moroccan). Confronted by the prejudice and patronizing attitude of the Ashkenazic yeshivah world to his Sephardic origins, he cuts himself off from the ultra-Orthodox Lithuanian world that had adopted him. The difficulty and pain that Berke experiences when he eventually breaks with his Ashkenazic mentor is at the center of this play and makes for gripping drama. But the work remains too close to the headlines — one is constantly
In contrast to these journalistic works, playwright-director Shmuel Hasfari continued his post-Zionist trilogy about the condition of the present-day Israeli. Produced by the Beit Lessin Theater, which consistently presented high-level Israeli drama, Hasfari's trilogy Kiddush-Hametz-Shiva grapples with the breakdown of ideology in post-Zionist Israel. The second work, Hametz, produced in 1995, takes place before the 1973 Yom Kippur War and revolves around the Passover rituals of “burning the hametz” and the traditional seder. Well-versed in these rituals, Hasfari structures them into his work in order to deny them, to purge the Israeli of the dark demons of the past, the obsession with the Holocaust and Zionism. In his counter-Haggadah he insists on a different kind of remembrance than that which the Passover seder dictates—a contrary one: “beware of museums” and free future generations from the Jewish schizophrenia, being torn between a normal Mediterranean life and a pathological past. Hasfari's works, like those of many other Israeli post-Zionist writers, point up how Israel's oppressive involvement in Jewish suffering can become transformed into an opposite reaction, a deep resentment of the burden of persecution and a desire to be free of it.

At the same time that obsession with the past has led to a resentment of the Jewish burden, it has also effected a new nostalgic trend that idealizes it. This is particularly evident in Kfar (Village), a production of the Gesher Theater, originally founded by Russian immigrants and now one of Israel's foremost drama companies. Directed by Yevgeny Aryeh, Kfar is an Israeli Our Town, narrated by the lovable village fool. It was written by Israeli playwright Yehoshua Sobol, whose previous sociopolitical dramas aggressively undermined Israel's heroic myths. In contrast, this lyrical work reconstructs a pastoral, pioneering Israel where Jew and Arab live amiably until the protagonist's brother is killed in the War of Independence.

In Motti Lerner's The August of His Days, the pioneer village at the beginning of the century becomes the background for the personal story of an aging man who wants to experience young love again. It is clear that although sociopolitical drama is the dominant theater form, the most successful works are those that reveal personal human emotions.

Music

Composer Menachem Zur claimed that the peace process had brought about an increased focus on classical Arab music, reflected in the establishment of the Department of Middle Eastern Music at the Rubin Academy of Music in Jerusalem. Instruction in Arabic musical modes was also instituted in Arab schools. At the same time, Israel was accepted as a member of the Asian Composers' League, and Israeli composers were coming into their own in Europe, receiving recognition in festivals in Prague and Kiev, as well as in Germany. They
were also recapturing audiences in Israel through the creation of more accessible music. During 1994 there was a sharp increase in the number of Israeli compositions played at concerts; in general, one-third of the repertory of Israeli orchestras was devoted to modern music.

Two important new works won competitions sponsored by the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (IPO) and the Israel Music Institute (IMI), which publishes Israeli music and disseminates information on the subject: The First Sinfonia Chromatica by composer Ari Ben Shabtai and Leon Schidlowsky's Absalom. Another important new work was Oded Zahavi's Concerto for Violin, which had its debut with the Haifa Symphony.

According to Paul Landau, IMI director, Israeli music was currently dominated by the generation of composers aged 35–50. Most of them were Rubin Academy graduates who completed doctorates in American universities and were influenced by the postmodernist, more communicative, neo-tonal music now prevalent in the United States. They include many Jewish and Middle Eastern folk elements in their compositions.

The Israel Philharmonic had experienced a shrinkage of subscribers, due in part to the aging and death of older subscribers and in part to competition—from new local orchestras that arose in the early nineties as a consequence of government support of Russian musicians and from the new opera. In the last two years, however, newly appointed financial officer Avigdor Levin launched a vigorous promotional campaign that was helping to recoup the losses.

**OPERA**

Opera's renaissance throughout the world in the last decade found expression in Israel in the innovative staging, emphasis on the dramatic, and presentation of fresh new operas by the New Israeli Opera. Established in 1985, the company moved into its permanent home in the Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center in October 1994—a lighthearted, postmodernist edifice accommodating 1,500 spectators—and attracted 15,000 subscribers a year.

In its first year in the new building, the New Israeli Opera exhibited great verve. Daniel Oren, music director of the Rome Opera, brought a star-studded cast and massive chorus to Tel Aviv in a production of Nabucco, the Verdi opera depicting the yearning of Jews in Babylonia for the Land of Israel. It also hosted the much-lauded world premiere of the original Israeli opera Josef, by composer Josef Tal, with libretto by poet Israel Eliraz. The octogenarian Tal, Israel's leading composer of opera, had experimented with avant-garde electronic and atonal music in earlier operas, many of which revolve around biblical themes, such as Saul at En-Dor and Amnon and Tamar. By contrast, Josef is a philosophical opera, relating the story of Josef Herman, a seeker who, rejecting his parents' bourgeois life, wakes up one morning unable to get out of bed or to continue his life as a bank official. The opera takes place in 24 short, tense scenes during the
month of June 1914, culminating in World War I. Like a character in a novel by Kafka—whose influence is evident—this Josef is plagued by fears and anxieties, experiencing a nightmarish loss of meaning in a world that seems increasingly oppressive. Josef Herman is institutionalized and imagines himself to be the biblical Joseph—a dreamer. But instead of envisioning how the world can be controlled and bettered, the Josef of the 20th century faces the death and destruction of two world wars and many Israeli wars.

The New Israeli Opera, under artistic and music director Gary Bertini, was developing fine Israeli-born singers, directors, and stage and lighting designers who were invited to work internationally. An important program for encouraging opera was the Vocal Arts Summer Institute, which attracted the best young singers from all over the world to its master classes. In addition, the Project for the Advancement of Opera fostered the composition of operas by granting composers fellowships. Among them, composer Haim Permont won first prize for his My Son, Dear to Me, which was scheduled for future performance at the New Israeli Opera.

**Dance**

Dance continued to be a vital art, especially for young spectators, with an increased number of important dance companies visiting Israel. The Tel Aviv Performing Arts Center dance series afforded a new forum for dance, while dance marathons and competitions and solo performances contributed to the dynamism at the Suzanne Dellal Center. Ohad Naharin's Batscheva Company continued to dominate the Israeli dance scene. At the same time, the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Group gained increasing prominence. Hopes had dissipated that Inbal, the Yemenite Dance Group, could be revitalized by the appointment of Margalit Oved as house choreographer. Oved, a former Inbal member who became a well-known modern dancer in the United States, was unable to create a commercially viable dance company, and the decision was made that Inbal would function in a limited way as a resource for teaching about ethnic Yemenite dance.

Ohad Naharin created two new works—"Z/NA" and "YAG." Dance critic Gabi Aldor described "Z/NA" as a provocative work in which the intimate, the unbearable pain within the person is brutally exposed. According to Aldor, "Most of the time the dancers move from the depths of the stage towards the audience. It is direct, and it is threatening. The movement language is wild, unrestrained. . . . The work is long, dark, and at times, exhausting. The stage has no boundaries, the choreography does not offer complicated enjoyable structures. . . . It is a hard work to watch. . . . It deals with violence, struggle and despair, that has a note of solace rising from within the minute before it ends."

"YAG," by contrast, is an intimate chamber work with much personal symbolism. The audience comes into the hall through the dancers' entrance and down the stage, creating a sense of individual involvement. Six dancers represent
the members of a family who love to dance, accompanied by texts that declare this. They dance in a compact lyrical mode, which critic Aldor described as “declining into a frozen, rarified state.” Unable to continue this way, the dance turns to a threatening playfulness, which ends up with the dancers sitting on a wood plank on top of a member of the troupe.

The Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company presented works in this period based on personal narratives. Resident choreographer Rami Be’er, who comes from a family of Holocaust survivors, created “Aide Memoire,” which grapples with the influence of Holocaust memories on Israelis, depicting how personal and collective associations play themselves out in their lives. In “Stardust,” choreographer Amir Kolben uses the terrible story of a Russian immigrant, an unemployed space scientist who could not find a job in his field and was found frozen to death in an abandoned hut, as the basis of this work on loss of identity.

**Literature: Fiction**

During the years 1994 and 1995, Israeli literature witnessed an expansion of the fictional trends that burst forth in the early 1990s. Fiction was lighter, more personal, with more writing by women, and strong feminist protagonists. Ethnic literature by young women was the most interesting breakthrough of these years. Thrillers and light literature continued to flood the market and dominate the best-seller lists. Even the renowned writer Yoram Kaniuk wrote a detective story, and the highly symbolic novelist A.B. Yehoshua a romance. Other veteran writers, like Aharon Appelfeld and Amos Oz, continued writing about themes close to their hearts.

In a controversial article in the June 6, 1994, culture section of *Yediot Aharonot*, Hebrew University professor Dan Meron warned that the superego was waning in Israeli literature, that even works by veteran writers like Meir Shalev, A.B. Yehoshua, and Batya Gur had become disconnected from larger value systems and cultural-national questions, focusing instead on the self, on personal identity, and the individual’s network of intimate relationships. “Writers,” declared Meron, “are turning from the collective to the individual, from Jewish-Arab relationships to male-female and parent-child relationships.” Along with this personal emphasis, Meron pointed out, was an interest in personal spiritualism, which he attributed to a blurring of the line between the “unconscious” and the “unknown.” There was also a great deal of scientific and medical information incorporated into some contemporary works, the sign of a new kind of realism in fiction, reflecting our information-obsessed age.

**Veteran Writers**

Although the new, more personal trends in Israeli literature were most prevalent among young writers, as Dan Meron pointed out, they could be discerned
as well in the works of veteran novelists once obsessed with the fate of the collective. A.B. Yehoshua's *Ha'shiva Me'hodu* (*Return from India*) is an example. Yehoshua declared in a TV interview that he was tired of narratives whose source lies in conflicting identities. "Even if Israel hasn't solved the conflicts with her neighbors, or between different segments of the population, I have acted as if she has resolved them," he admitted, "and have written a story about personal relationships."

*Ha'shiva Me'hodu* is ostensibly a romantic novel about the hopeless love of a young doctor for an older married woman. It also mirrors the recent infatuation of young Israelis with the personal spiritual life they find in India, which contrasts sharply with the more national-communal religious thrust of Judaism in Israel. Benjy, a young Israeli doctor, accompanies the administrative head of his hospital and his wife to India to tend to their daughter, who has been seriously ill. He falls in love with the middle-aged mother. Yehoshua, who can be both a subtle psychologist and a wonderfully grotesque-comic writer, portrays the mental calisthenics of the obsessed, tortured lover that lead him to marry an independent, India-loving kibbutznick, Michaela, so that he can continue adoring the older woman from afar without suspicion. Although the story, often tongue-in-cheek, is about male-female relationships, one cannot be oblivious to the collective theme embedded in the structure. The very word "*Shiva*" in the title, a reference to the Hindu goddess, sparks associations to the Zionist endeavor. *Shiva* in Hebrew means "return," perhaps referring to the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel. Yehoshua has observed in his writings on Zionism that Jews prefer the yearning for the Land of Israel over the actual reality of living in a normal Israel. In the same way, he depicts Michaela yearning for India, and Benjy longing for an unattainable love relationship. Yehoshua realizes that longing—diaspora—is built into the human condition. People prefer to create faraway promised lands or to yearn for the spouses of others rather than reconciling themselves to the joys of everyday reality.

Meir Shalev has also written a whimsical love story, *Ke'yamim Ahadim* (*Like a Few Days*). Like his former two works, it is a legend about the pioneering villages of Israel. But while his first work, *Roman Russi* (*Blue Mountain*), de-mythologizes the Zionist myth, this new novel is less polemical. On the surface, it playfully sketches the love of three men for Yehudit, whose husband abandoned her, and describes how each one courts her. The most romantic of all, Yaakov (like the Jacob of the Bible, who worked for Rachel for seven years "and it was as a few days"), attempts to create an orderly world in which this love will find its perfect place. His Italian worker advises him that "if the whole world will be ready—the tables, benches, the chupah, the food, the rebbe—then the bride has to come." And so Yaakov learns to dance the tango, which is the dance of weddings, to cook the perfect wedding meal, and to sew the most beautiful wedding gown. The reader's tension rises, waiting to see if the love will indeed be consummated. But on her way to the wedding, Yehudit changes her mind and mar-
ries one of the other men. In this charming tale strewn with mythic and biblical associations, Shalev, like Yehoshua, cannot entirely shed his political message. His tale implies that there is nothing inexorable in nature. The ideological assumption that still exists in Israel, that if one does the right thing, if one works according to some larger conceptual system, the desired end, the messianic hope, will inevitably be fulfilled, is shown to be a delusion.

Aharon Appelfeld writes taut, lyrical tales presaging the end of European Jewry, often focusing on Jewish-Christian relationships at the beginning of the 20th century. His most recent novel, Ad She’yaaleh Amud Hashahar (Until the Dawn’s Light), incorporates the currently relevant theme of the “battered wife” into his portrayal of Jewish-Christian relationships. On one level, the novel is a subtle psychological portrait of a battered wife in a small Austrian village. But on another level it symbolizes the cruel, complex dance between Jew and non-Jew in Europe that came to a climax in the Holocaust. Blanka, a Jew and star pupil in her high-school class, converts to Christianity and marries a Christian fellow student, the physically attractive, peasantlike Adolph. But a destructive dynamic evolves, whereby her refinement and fragility are interpreted as a Jewish lack of vitality, which in turn elicits beating and bestiality on Adolph’s part. Paralyzed by fear for herself and their son, the repressed Blanka eventually kills Adolph in an unpremeditated act and flees to bring her son to a Jewish refuge before surrendering to the police. The uncanny psychological parallels between Jewish-Christian relations and the “battered wife” make this a powerful book.

Pursuing his own agenda, Amos Oz has moved from his earlier expressionist writing, which probes the hysterical, psychological underground of Israeli society, to a quieter, more controlled mode, examining family relationships. Written in a minimalist manner, his works have become sensitive seismographs of couplehood. Al Tagidi Layla (Don’t Say Night), the most recent Oz novel in this mode, involves a childless couple living on the edge of a mysterious desert, where the woman is devoted to creating a home for wayward children. Oz also continues to return to the formative 1948 period in his life and that of the State of Israel. In Panter b’Martef (Panther in the Basement), a novel for youth (and yet not only for youth), a middle-aged man recaptures the 12-year-old child he was at that time, seething with Zionist slogans and wartime spy movies. But his simplistic good guy/bad guy vision of the world is disrupted by his friendship with an English officer, which brings his peers to brand him a traitor. In spite of the youthful quality of the story, with its fantasies of spy intrigues, Oz’s personal preoccupations predominate. The decade of the forties was a crucial period in his life—his depressive mother committed suicide and the State of Israel was established. Oz, like James Joyce, continues to write variations on the central themes of his life.

In Lev Tel Aviv (The Heart of Tel Aviv), Nathan Shaham has also painted the conspiratorial, ideological mindset of a child growing up in Tel Aviv during the forties. Memories of the bullying friends who became nationalist extremists vie
with images of his intellectual, apolitical father and a prostitute neighbor who
loved an Arab. Shaham's theme is the Zionist fall from idealism.

**WOMEN'S LITERATURE**

The feminization of Israeli literature is evident in the flood of works by both
young and veteran women writers. Some older authors, like Yehudit Hendel,
were revitalized by the energy emanating from the new women's trend. Her newest
collection of short fiction, *Arukhat Boker T'mimah* (An Innocent Breakfast), pre-
sents sharp portrayals of women's lives, the betrayals they endure, the domestic
details that engage them—hostessing, dress, and decor ironically perceived in the
context of human mortality.

Batya Gur, a pioneer of the detective story in Israel, published a general novel,
*Lo Kakh Tiarti Li* (Afterbirth), which grapples with issues of womanhood and
the ambiguity of gender definition in realistic, physiological terms. Yehudit
Katzir's first novel, *L'Matis Yesh Et Hashemesh Babeten* (Matisse Has the Sun in
His Belly), published five years after her best-selling collection of short stories,
explores losses women suffer. It is the story of a woman in love with an older man
at the same time that her mother is dying of cancer, yet who finds meaning in art.

Most of the women's fiction of the last few years is not in the personal, ro-
mantic mode of Katzir's novel. Lea Aini's *Mishehi Tzrikhah Lihiot Kan* (Some-
one Must Be Here) presents a cruel view of lower-class sexuality, an Israeli ver-
sion of Gorky's *Lower Depths*, narrated by an abandoned 17-year-old girl. Here,
too, art is the redeeming quality for the protagonist, and a radiant lyricism shines
through this sullied world.

One of the important new developments in women's literature is the emergence
of ethnic women's fiction. In the wake of veteran male writer Sami Michael's re-
alistic depiction of sexuality in the Iraqi family in his novel *Victoria*, other works
have emerged portraying the position of women in the machismo Middle East-
ern Jewish cultures. Dorit Rabinyan's *Simtat Hashekeditot B'Omerijan* (Street of
the Almond Trees in Omerijan) depicts life in a Persian village at the beginning
of the century. Based on her grandmother's stories, Rabinyan uses sensuous im-
agey and folk memories to tell the tales of spunky young women "coming of age"
in that society. Ronit Matalon's autobiographical novel *Zeh im Hapanim Aleinu*
(The One Facing Us) traces an Egyptian-Jewish family in its dispersion and dis-
integration. Matalon recreates a visit as a young girl to her uncle living in Africa,
revealing the flip side of the machismo picture: how the charming, hedonistic Lev-
antine man uprooted from his traditional setting is alienated in Western society.

Another important development in women's literature is Michal Guvrin’s novel
*Hashem*, which raises important theological issues for the post-Zionist Israeli. The
protagonist of the novel is the child of Holocaust survivors. Finding nothing in
the Zionism of her upbringing to help her work through the trauma of the fam-
ily memory, she turns to religion, mystically hoping to heal the fissure in the cos-
mos, which according to Kabbalah, explains the imperfection and suffering in the world. Guvrin succeeds in portraying the inner life of a returnee, a “baalat teshuvah,” whose intense, compulsive vision verges on madness. Ultimately, though, she comes to accept the everyday, human world with its limitations.

POSTMODERNIST LITERATURE

Postmodernist fiction, with its abstract, playful quality, blurring the line between high art and pop culture, continued to be written by a few fine writers. One of the most innovative and productive of these was Orly Castel-Bloom, who challenges the boundaries between art and reality, pushing clichés and everyday phrases to absurdity by depicting them literally. In her most recent novel, *Mina Lisa*, she takes off from the figure of speech “eating up books.” Mina, once a scriptwriter, is a happy housewife until her husband brings home the 200-year-old family “ancient” to live with them. Mina discovers that this old woman, ensconced in what was once her studio, does not eat ordinary food, but literally devours the scripts Mina once wrote. The old woman leads her to a world where scriptwriters chained to their pens are seeking to be liberated. Mina takes up the challenge. In this run-on, film-influenced, whimsical narrative, Castel-Bloom zigzags between illusion and reality. The mad chain of events reflects contemporary woman veering between abstracted, alienated routine and manic fantasy.

Another postmodernist writer, Etgar Korat, published a collection of mini-stories. Like Castel-Bloom, he effects constant surprises through his play on Hebrew street language and slang. An unexpected turn of events springs from his fusion of wonderlike emotion and the grotesque.

HOMOSEXUAL LITERATURE

Homosexuality is not foreign to Israeli literature, but in the last years, an actual wave of homosexual writers could be discerned. In *La Marque Turque* (The Turkish Market,) Benny Ziffer, editor of the *Ha’aretz* literary supplement, weaves together the memoirs of his idiosyncratic Turkish-Jewish family in the thirties, including a homosexual writer in Paris of that time to whom he looks for the roots of his own sexual preference. He considers it ironic that his grandfather’s Zionist dream to create a “new Jewish man” should be so unraveled. Nineteen-year-old Shai Tubali expresses the inner world of the gay man through the rhythms of Tel Aviv street language.

THRILLERS

The light Israeli detective genre was pioneered by Batya Gur and Shulamit Lapid in the late 1980s. But they saw themselves as using the detective genre in
order to go beyond it. Gur writes intellectual works that shed light on closed professional societies, using the very tools of analysis cultivated in these professions to unravel murders that occur. Lapid employs the detective format as a vehicle for psycho-social commentary. Historian Yaakov Shavit has pointed up the affinity between the detective novel and historical and realistic fiction in portraying the detailed fabric of society at a specific time. It is perhaps not coincidental that women pioneered the genre in Israel. They are, in effect, the Israeli Jane Austens chronicling the manners and mores of Israeli society, albeit in detective format.

Batya Gur’s new detective story, Hamerhak Hanakhon (Orchestral Murder), dealing with the world of music and Israeli musicians, continues her exploration of various professional and cultural societies. Another novel in this mode written by a woman is Imah Hayta Zohelet (Mother Used to Creep), by Limor Nachmias, in which private investigator Michali, a clever, mad, Tel Aviv type, poses as an artist’s model in order to catch a serial murderer of artists’ models. Nachmias’s work echoes the hard-edged Tel Aviv tone of many current Israeli novels.

On the whole, Israel was flooded with works of lesser literary quality, written in the action mode rather than as novels of manners. They are characterized by sensationalism and violence, influenced by films and film effects. Ram Oren’s sensationalistic thrillers Pitui (Seduction), Ot Cain (The Sign of Cain), and Framed are in this category. Their best-seller popularity can perhaps be attributed to the normal desire for escapist, relaxing, easy reading.

During this period there were also a number of serious thrillers reflecting Israeli society and history. Yoram Kaniuk’s Tigerhill, written in a surrealistic mode, delves into the history of the Yishuv (pre-state Israel) with a murder taking place that was intended for the protagonist herself. Yoav Levitas Halevi’s Kofer Nefesh (Ransom) also relates to Zionist history, unearthng a strange family secret from the early days of the Yishuv. Oren Sanderson’s Rikud Ha-dov (Dance of the Bears) is based on the Jonathan Pollard spy case. In Sherman B’horef (Sherman’s Winter), Amnon Dankner has created an original detective hero in an orderly, Orthodox police investigator whose sharp talmudic logic helps him to solve murders and to face unthinkable child abuse.

Literature: Poetry

A possible renaissance of interest in poetry was suggested by the popularity of recent poetry books. Among the most sensational was the appearance of Natan Zach’s first collection of poetry in 12 years. Zach, the master of irony, control, and distance, brought about the poetic revolution of the early sixties, turning poetry away from the pathos and collective concerns of Nathan Alterman to a cooler, more distanced and casual tone. The poetry in his new work does not return to the collective, but is much more personal and confessional. He has even rewritten many earlier poems in a more direct, autobiographical way.

Another contribution to the poetry scene is the “Collected Poems So Far” of
Dalia Rabikovitch. This much-loved poet, who made her debut in the fifties, initially wrote sensual, biblically stylized poetry. Later works speak about love in a more qualified manner, are involved with death, and present a feminist depiction of women as “mechanical dolls.” She also writes about Jerusalem, but there is a bitter death tinge to these poems. Another woman poet who was well received is Chava Pinchas-Cohen, a religious poet who harnesses conflicting elements, lyric poetry with complex ideas, everyday language with biblical and midrashic references.

Israeli poetry sustained a deep loss with the death in 1995 at the age of 60 of David Avidan, who with Natan Zach and Yehuda Amichai revolutionized Hebrew poetry. He infused Anglo-Saxon modernism—a bluntness and sense of contemporary technology—into Hebrew poetry. A posthumously published book of poems, *Sotim K’tanim* (Small Deviants), by Hezy Loskly, who died from AIDS a few years ago, points up an aestheticism that is at the base of the poet’s homosexuality, to which he yielded his life.

**Art**

According to Yigal Zalmona, chief curator of contemporary art at the Israel Museum, the slump in the world art market influenced Israeli artists to become more involved in designing installations, rather than individual objects like paintings and sculpture. These installations are total works of art combining video, objects, and photographs. An example of this was the exhibit “Chapter” at the Israel Museum, featuring two young artists, Guy Bar-Amotz and Sigalit Landau. Bar-Amotz’s video installation “Eidan’s Kindergarten” included an electric train running around turned-over furniture, going into black spaces. The use of video is widespread in young Israeli art, and photography plays a growing role. Another installation artist, Nahum Tevet, exhibited at the newly restored Haifa Art Museum along with Ido Bar El and Barry Friedland, both of whom represented Israel in the San Paulo Biennale.

“Israeli artists today,” says Zalmona, “are less concerned with the identity issue, ‘What is Israeli art?’ They’ve turned to larger ecological concerns. They see the ephemerality, the process of dissolution of objects. Israeli artists today are also less naive about how art is presented, how it is exhibited. There’s greater intellectualization, self-consciousness. Artists deal with theoretical questions that test the limits of art.”

Feminist art was reflected in Ariela Schweid’s installation of photographs, plaster casts, and pieces of clothing, which was based on the artist’s breast cancer but had implications for femininity altogether. Shuli Nachshon also used breast cancer as the basis for a video document.

One of the most important installations designed by an Israeli artist is Micha Ullman’s “Library” in the Bebel-platz in east Berlin, commissioned to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the public burning at this square of books written
by Jews. Installed in 1995, the monument is actually a pit dug into the ground, which looks like an underground library made of white concrete and plaster, with 14 stories of empty shelves. Viewers cannot go down into this space but must look into it through a glass window fixed in the paving stones of the square. The artificial light that constantly fills the empty library has a chilling effect. Through their reflections in the glass, viewers find themselves in the pit.

The Tel Aviv Museum exhibit "New Horizons: Sculpture" in spring 1996 presented the seminal school of Israeli sculptors of the fifties, which included Yitzhak Danziger and Yehiel Shemi, who created welded-steel works. Previous to this, Danziger's statue "Nimrod" was on display at the Israel Museum. In the fifties, this statue symbolized the primal Canaanite character of the new Israeli, the negation of the Galut Jew, and the emphasis on the Land. Its reemergence was consonant with the nostalgic spirit that had begun to surface in all the arts in Israel. Zalmona connects this sentimentality with an obsession with childhood on the part of many Israeli artists, evidenced, he believes, in the use of toys in artworks.

Even with the popularity of video art and art installations, realism continued to hold its own in Israel. The spring 1996 exhibit "Four Realistic Artists" at Haifa University's Hecht Museum reflected a realism which is neither rhetorical nor political, quite different from the antimilitaristic realism of David Reeb, for example. According to its curator, Avishai Ayal, this exhibit did not tell a personal or national story; rather the works were still lifes, products of long, sustained study of the body and nature, self-contained objects that take on a life of their own.

Artists like Paris-based Avigdor Arikha and Yitzhak Livneh are abstract painters who have turned to figurative art. Livneh, the child of Holocaust survivors, imbibed his parents' sense of loss. Initially, he painted abstract canvases where absence is palpable. Even when he turned to realism, his works still projected a sense of emptiness and desolation. For an exhibit titled "Biedemeer," shown in 1995 at the Marie Paissy Galerie in Tel Aviv, Livneh copied German reproductions from the last century, creating stylized paintings of 19th-century bourgeois European families, suggesting the milieu of suppression in which Nazism was nurtured.

**Intellectual Trends**

The field of Jewish history was facing some crucial challenges. "Jewish history has gone beyond post-Zionist criticism of the Establishment interpretation of the 1948 war to a critique of all Jewish history," said Polish-Jewish historian Moshe (Murray) Rosman, of Bar-Ilan University. While 19th-century historian Heinrich Graetz proffered an assimilationist historiography advocating the integration of Jews into the general society, Zionist historians like Ben Zion Dinur and Shmuel Ettinger promoted a Jewish-centered version of history, where events were seen as leading up to the return to the Land of Israel and the establishment of a sov-
ereign state. Believing that every nation has a unique spirit and character, they argued that Jews have a right to their own unique history and do not have to be subsumed under that of another. Recent historiography was witnessing a swing back to a more universal approach. "There has been a creeping identity crisis for Jewish historians," says Rosman, "with historians questioning national history in general and what they see as a ghetto approach to Jewish history. Some Israeli historians demand an integration of Jewish and general history, claiming that there should not be separate departments of Jewish history as there are at most Israeli universities. Rather, the history of the Jews should be perceived in light of the developments of the nations in which they lived." In a word, Jews are no longer heroes of their own history.

This critical approach to Jews of the past already existed in the analysis by Hebrew University medieval historian Yisroel Yuval of Jewish behavior during the Crusades (Zion Journal, 1993). It is known that some Jews killed their children "al kiddush hashem," as martyrs to God, to prevent them from being forced to convert to Christianity. According to Yuval, they believed that the murder of these children would provoke God's ultimate revenge on the Christians. Moreover, claims Yuval, this became the source of the blood libel, the Christian claim that Jews killed Christian children and used the blood for matzah. Yuval contends that the Christians thought that if Jews were willing to kill their own children, then they would certainly do the same to Christian children. Yuval's speculation aroused much controversy and criticism, which continued through 1994 and 1995, with other historians maintaining that his theory was speculative. There is nothing in the documents of the time, his critics said, that indicated Jews thought their martyrdom would put into motion an apocalyptic messianic revenge, nor proof that this influenced Christian blood libel.

The perception of Hassidism was also undergoing changes. Moshe Idel's Hasidism Between Ecstasy and Magic challenges the view proposed by the late Gershon Scholem that saw Hassidism as emerging primarily from Lurianic mysticism. The Hebrew University scholar claims rather that Hassidism drew on a wide range of traditions and sources, including other schools of Kabbalah. Moshe Rosman's study of the Baal Shem Tov, Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Baal Shem Tov, overturns the romantic assumptions of previous historiography that the Besht, the founder of Hassidism, was anti-bourgeois and rebellious. On the basis of archival documents, he shows that the Baal Shem Tov was a citizen in good standing who was provided with tax-free housing and had a semi-official status as a healer and shaman. Bar-Ilan's Rosman also indicates that many Hassidic practices did not originate with the Besht, but rather that he directed his community to already existent practices. Like Idel, Rosman sees the Besht as calling upon eclectic sources.

On the other side of the coin, the image of the Lithuanian yeshivah movement, an alternative ideology to Hassidism, had also been qualified. Shaul Stampfer's book, The Lithuanian Yeshiva as It Was, approaches the founders and rabbis of
the Volozhin, Mir, and Telz yeshivahs with an appreciation of their intellectual vitality, in contrast to the views of a previous generation of historians that saw the yeshivahs as the last gasp of a dying world. At the same time, Stampfer reveals the social and economic realities of the yeshivah community and shows how family dynasties and economic interests were forged in the name of Torah.

An important development in Israeli historiography during this period was the emergence of Jewish women's history. Conferences on Jewish women's history multiplied, and a section on "Women's History" was established within the Israeli Historical Society. Yael Atzmon published a collection of research essays in history, anthropology, literature, and Talmud, related to Jewish women. Called "A Window into the Life of Women in Jewish Societies," the book contains articles on such subjects as the history of violence to Jewish women, an analysis of women's spirituality, and women in Muslim countries.

Archaeology

Work continued at the magnificent archaeological site of Zippori (Sepphoris), a Galilean city that was a center of Jewish life during the first centuries of the Common Era (C.E.). An abundance of mosaics have been found there—more than at any other ancient city in the Land of Israel—and the finds have changed the thinking about the times. "Zippori has transformed the attitude to Jewish society in the Land of Israel in the first centuries C.E. It teaches what life was like in a large Jewish city during the Roman and Byzantine periods," said archaeologist Zeev Weiss, who, together with Ehud Netzer, both of the Hebrew University, was in charge of the dig. In an interview, Weiss said, "Most of the cities like Beit Shean and Caesarea were gentile cities. What becomes clear in Zippori is how the Jews were influenced by the same Hellenistic art, architecture, and life-style. Jews went to the theater, and there are even talmudic sermons that use metaphors taken from the world of entertainment." The mosaics echo elements of the Dionysian cult that emerged at the time, while the Nile Festival Hall mosaic depicts the pagan rites celebrating the rise of the Nile and the harvest. At the same time, the finding of utensils for rituals of purity indicates the presence of traditional Jewish practices in the city. The most dramatic discovery is the Zippori synagogue mosaic, which consists of biblical scenes, including Temple ritual and stories related to Abraham and the Akedah story, "the binding of Isaac," and signs of the Zodiac. It has been interpreted as pointing to the restoration of religious life and Israel's redemption.

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