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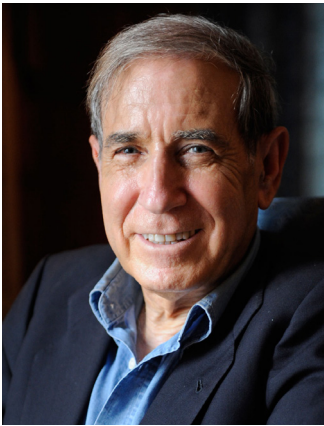
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Leading in positive

Shlomo Ben Ami

“A great leader is one who can betray their electorate”



Shlomo Ben Ami | Vice president of the Toledo International Centre for Peace.

He studied at Tel Aviv University where he did his B.A. and M.A. in History and Hebrew Literature. He also received a doctorate in History from Oxford University.

In 1987, he was appointed as Israel's first Ambassador to Spain, a position he held until 1991. He was also a member of Israel's delegation to the Madrid International Peace Conference in 1991. In 1996, he was elected to the Knesset (Parliament of Israel), and was a member of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees.

When the Labour Party government led by Ehud Barak took office in 1999, Ben-Ami became the Minister of Internal Security. One year later, he became Minister of Foreign Affairs. As such he conducted the secret negotiations with Abu Ala in Stockholm (The Swedish Channel). He participated with Prime Minister Barak in the Camp David Summit, after which he led the Israeli team in all the different phases of the negotiations with the Palestinians, including at Taba.

Historian, politician and front-line participant in the negotiations between Israel and Palestine in Madrid in 1991, and at Camp David in 2000. How would you define your leadership model? In your experience, what qualities should a good leader have?

I would highlight two essential qualities. On the one hand, the virtue of leading by example. This is the great question of our time: generating value in a business environment while demonstrating social responsibility. On the other, the ability to

see the way things are going, that is, not letting events catch you unaware. In the business world it is impossible to lead without direction, and this is what foresight gives you.

“Leaders must go beyond the business world and understand what is happening around them”

The energy crisis arising from the conflict in Ukraine and geopolitical tensions between China and the US and the challenges in the Middle East are giving rise to a complex social and political scenario. What qualities should the leaders of the future have to attract stability and peace in these times of global crisis?

Leaders must go beyond the business world and understand what is happening around them. The need is for people with a broad vision, who you can talk to about what is happening in the international environment, because everything that happens influences investors. We were accustomed to an economy with its own internal logic, but nowadays we live in a world in which geopolitics intervenes in the economy and determines the types of policies that must be implemented. Therefore, leaders must develop that sensitivity to what is happening around them.

A rapid succession of changes is currently sweeping across the political, geostrategic and technological stages and companies need to be prepared if they are to address these changes successfully. How can leaders motivate their teams to adapt to new domestic and international circumstances that have a heavy impact on their businesses?

Leaders must encourage their teams to integrate new technologies. We have moved towards the knowledge economy. Nowadays, manpower generates less wealth than competencies. Since knowledge creates value, education is what generates new social gaps. Nowadays, the best legacy that you can leave your children is a quality education so that they can enter the world of knowledge, which is what moves the modern economy.

A clear example of this is to be found in Israel. Israel is a country that does not have water, or land, or natural resources, so it has had to develop a knowledge economy based on technology. New leadership must constantly adapt to the world of knowledge. We are entering a period in which the skills you have learnt at university are only the first stage of your education, because technology does not stop changing and you will have to move and bring your skills up to date.

In the current environment, technological capabilities and digitalisation have become a fundamental ally for countries' economic and

social development. Evidence of this are the Next Generation EU funds, which promote a higher level of digitalisation of the economy. What role do leaders have in the commitment not to leave anybody behind in this digital transformation?

We are facing an unprecedented challenge, as in this war between the two superpowers, China and the US, we must not rule out the development of completely different programming languages. We are also entering a more complex world from an ethical standpoint, with the introduction of artificial intelligence to think for us.

In the past we thought that science, as shown to us by thinkers such as Albert Einstein, was the engine of civilisation. Now, that discipline has been replaced by technology, by Silicon Valley. That is to say, we expect from technology solutions that we used to expect from science, such as improving life expectancy or curing serious illnesses.

Another matter that governments must take into account is that the irruption of new technologies will lead the labour market to shrink, because certain jobs will disappear, and there will be an increase in free time. An alternative social system to the current one must be created that addresses what needs to be done in this new reality.

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You are a noted politician, diplomat, historian and writer, who have been your mentors? Which leaders or important people have inspired you throughout your career?

My mentors belong to the worlds of diplomacy and politics. I consider myself to be a student of Henry Kissinger, who at 99 years old is still an important thinker. He has just published a book in which he analyses five leaders, including Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle is noteworthy because he was able to reach important leadership positions despite not having the same natural conditions as other leaders; he was capable of overcoming the obstacles that life had put in his way.

Another trait that I have always admired is that great leaders are capable of disassociating themselves from their ideological bases; in other words, a great leader is one who can betray their electorate. If they were faithful at all times, they would never manage to do great things. Churchill, for example, did not stop changing party because the important thing was what he represented, not the party affiliation. Power is not the objective, power is the vehicle for doing something important.

In addition to diversity, sustainability is another of the big challenges facing us as a society. It is essential to encourage sustainable companies that take environmental, social and economic issues into account to create value at short and long term, how can leaders convey the importance of sustainability among their stakeholders?

Firstly, it is important for governments to foster policies that help companies develop sustainability-oriented projects. I would like to see more companies in Spain with a social impact, that is to say organisations that seek to generate value, but with a clear orientation towards social impact. Fortunes are invested on this in the US.

Also, I would like to see the Ministry of the Environment become a prestigious body, at the same level as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Defence, so that it could guide and inspire society. In France, the countryside is subsidised because it does not generate sufficient income, but they understand that without agriculture you cannot preserve the environment, so the countryside is part of France's national heritage. So government policy has to be to invest to generate that environmental consciousness.

Also, companies must be aware of sustainability indices and define reachable targets.

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Finally, young people are once again the hardest hit by this new crisis marked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the last trace of the pandemic and the acceleration of the digital revolution that has positive effects and also negative ones, such as disinformation. What positive message would you send out to the new generations?

I think that, in contrast to previous generations, young people today have greater capacity for recovery. Quality free university education should be encouraged. We have seen the example in the US, where Biden forgave thousands of students' debts. If there is a shortfall, it should not be used in consumption but human capital infrastructure; we are talking of an investment, not debt.

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