

THE DAY SADAT CAME TO JERUSALEM

On the outskirts of Jerusalem, on the route which Sadat would follow a few hours later, the first Egyptian flag waved festively next to an Israeli flag atop a gasoline station. There was danger in the air as well as festival. Army trucks had been wheeling into position along the road from Tel Aviv. The sense of danger was not just related to President Sadat's security.

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Jerusalem hotel lobbies were awash with foreign journalists. A bellboy walked around holding aloft a blackboard which urged somebody named Levine to report immediately to Barbara Walters' room. Some wag was dissuaded from sending around a blackboard urging Barbara Walters to report to his room. John Scali interviewed Congressman Wright of Texas, before a T.V. camera in the lobby of the Jerusalem Hilton. Wright said that it was all very exciting, and that he hoped that Israel would respond to Sadat's gesture by being "forthcoming." In the center of the lobby, the hotel had constructed three large images out of margarine: a Mogen David, a dove, and an Egyptian pyramid. Matzoth had been used to give the pyramid a realistic texture. Among the many quotes being passed from mouth to mouth was Begin's hope that he would be able to visit the pyramids, which "after all, we helped to build."

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In the rear of the hotel, soldiers were being mobilized. On one long bench sat a number of boy soldiers, looking no older than sixteen, having been called up

for duty. On a smaller bench nearby another boy soldier, looking, if possible, younger than the rest sat with his mother and father. They sat silently, not looking at each other, the mother touching the boy. Her eyes were frightened. When he suddenly looked up, the father's eyes flashed angrily at passers-by, startling and disturbing them. That small bench was the central scene around which the entire ceremonial drama was unfolding in Jerusalem.

Children waved Egyptian flags. People lined the roads, cheered and sang to Sadat as he drove by. One group sang "When the Saints Go Marching By," in Hebrew. Most clung to their TV sets. Some wept as they watched Sadat walk onto Israeli soil. The weeping was not just in joy, but also in tension, In anxiety, in the fear of failure.

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The "other shoe dropped" when Sadat made it clear that he had now done his part, the next step was up to Israel.

What had Sadat done? He had, in a palpable way, recognized the existence of Israel for the first time, which sent some Arab nations into frenzy. But Israel had already long recognized the existence of Egypt. Israeli leaders, including Begin, had already long offered to travel to Cairo. So, from one perspective, Sadat was merely making a response equal to Israel's earlier initiatives. There was now a symmetry from which both nations could negotiate substantive matters.

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Of course, it took more courage for Sadat to recognize Israel, than it had taken for Israel to recognize Egypt, under the circumstances. But the circumstances had been unfair. It was as though one man had come up to another and started beating him with a stick; then stopped, and said: "Okay, I won't beat you any more, but now you owe me something in return."

However, one of the few statements by Jimmy Carter with which the Israelis would have fully agreed in recent months, was his observation that "life is not always fair." Israelis understand that, they have more important things to worry about, and they are not about to discount the possibilities opened up by Sadat.

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One possibility is that the Middle East situation could become rational and non-Levantine for the first time. Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia always had more reason to oppose the P.L.O. and the Soviet Union, than to oppose Israel. There is a natural confluence of interest among these three Arab states, Israel and America.

Some Israeli nerves were jangled by the thought that America might bobble these new possibilities. There was some feeling that Sadat's visit was itself a lucky product of America's earlier bobbling - like a halfback who fumbles the ball for a gain. One Israeli observed:

"Sadat felt, especially after the joint U.S.-Soviet communique, that Carter would

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not give him anything that Begin could not give him except the Russians, whom Sadat did not want."

Sadat's sudden trip to Jerusalem, although it was full of optional meanings for him, was partly an anti-Soviet expression, with a sly dig in the White House ribs. If America takes the hint, and does not try to foist the Soviet Union unnecessarily on the scene, perhaps that rational scenario can be played out.

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But, of course, everyone knew that it was still far from that. There were some immediate local issues to be accomodated - not the least of which was the West Bank, its land and people. Sadat said in Jerusalem: "Our land is sacred." Begin gave the only response possible: "Our land is sacred." They were referring, in part, to the same piece of real estate.

That is the starting point. Now it might be possible for the first time to directly negotiate an arrangement for that doubly sacred land. In one of the revelatory moments during Sadat's visit, Begin laid down the primary value on which Israel would base its hard negotiations. Asked whether Israel would really give up a foot of the West Bank, Menahim Begin said, in careful, measured phrases: "The security of Israel is in the lives of its men, women and children."

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Somewhere listening, and understanding, were the man and woman who, with their young son, had passively acted out the central drama of Sadat's visit on a small Jerusalem bench hours ago.