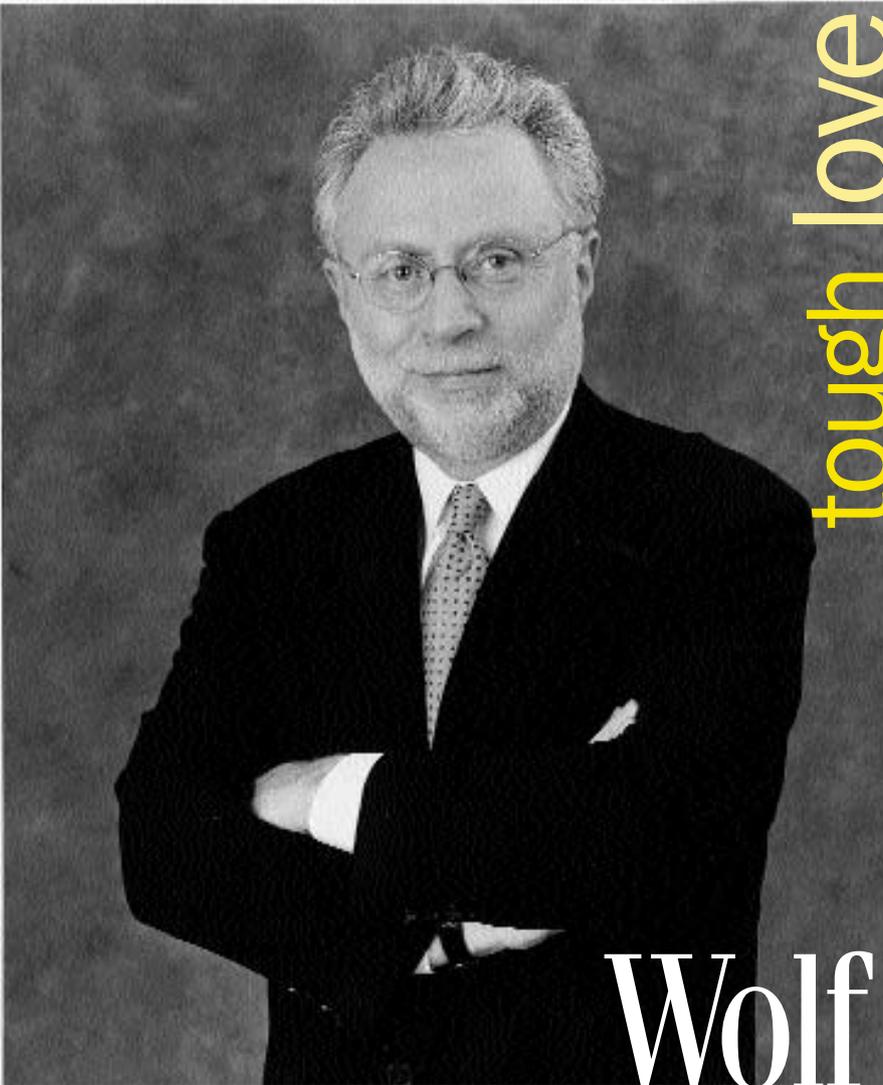


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tough love

Wolf Blitzer

by Aliza Davidovitz

History can provide mankind with many answers, but it is truly the great questions that can direct the course of history. Wolf Blitzer asked one such question over two decades ago and redirected not only his own career, but also the course that peace would take between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East.

When Wolf Blitzer raised his hand 23 years ago at a Blair House press conference in Washington, D.C. hosted by Anwar Sadat, neither could have anticipated where the young journalist's question would lead. Blitzer recounts in his 1985 book, *Between Washington and Jerusalem*, how he looked Sadat right in the eye when he introduced himself as a reporter from *The Jerusalem Post*. Despite the state of belligerency between Israel and Egypt, Sadat showed no negative emotion toward the young Jewish journalist. Blitzer, with "ping-pong diplomacy" on his mind, proceeded with his question:

"Mr. President, you seem so sincere in your quest for peace. Why don't you do something to demonstrate that to Israel? Perhaps you could open some direct human contact with Israel? Why not allow an exchange of journalists or athletes or scholars?"

Seven months later, on November 20, 1977, both precedent and history were defied when President Sadat became the first Arab leader ever to visit the Israeli Knesset. Sadat credited Blitzer's pivotal question as one of his reasons for making the trip to Jerusalem. As a result, Wolf Blitzer received tremendous publicity and gained his first interview on national television. He was then asked by NBC to assist in the coverage of Sadat's trip to Israel and to serve as a commentator on the nascent Middle East peace process. Almost as soon as Cable News Network (CNN) appeared in the '80s, Blitzer began making regular guest appearances as a Middle East expert. Then in 1990, after *The Jerusalem Post* had been sold, a CNN producer asked Blitzer what he was intending to do next. Blitzer replied as a joke that he'd come work for CNN. Two weeks later he was hired, and a few months later he was reporting live as CNN's permanent Pentagon correspondent. From his days as a novice reporter at Reuters in the early '70s to his current role as anchor of CNN's *The World Today* and *Late Edition*, Blitzer continues to prod world leaders with probing queries.

"Reporters' questions are very important to policy makers," says Blitzer, in his interview with *Lifestyles*. "When I ask Madeleine Albright or President Clinton a question on one of my shows, it could spark a thought and make them realize they should be going in a certain direction."

With another of his more memorable questions, Blitzer led the President in a direction he preferred not to travel.

"Monica Lewinsky's life has been changed forever, her family's life has been changed forever. I wonder how you feel about that and what, if anything, you'd like to say to Monica Lewinsky at this minute?" Blitzer asked Clinton at a news conference on February 6, 1998. A near speechless President responded with a laugh, "That's good! That's good! But at this minute I'm going to stick with my position and not comment." (A year later, Clinton did indeed apologize to



Photo courtesy of Yad Vashem Tribute Dinner

At Yad Vashem Tribute Dinner (l-r) Zygmunt Wilt, dinner chairman; Wolf Blitzer; Avner Shalev, chairman, Yad Vashem Directorate, and Eli Zborowski, chairman, American and International Societies for Yad Vashem.

Monica Lewinsky and her family.)

Luckily, the "no comments" Blitzer has received throughout his career have been greatly outnumbered by the distinguished interviews he has obtained. He has interviewed every American President since Gerald Ford and every Israeli Prime Minister since Golda Meir, in addition to heads of state from around the world. Recalling his days as a young reporter, Blitzer reveals that Golda Meir was probably the most thrilling Israeli prime minister he's interviewed.

"She was a short little woman," Blitzer recalls, "but a real powerhouse."

Blitzer also fondly remembers his many interviews with Menachem Begin.

"I always loved interviewing Begin because he was so feisty, and so much of a challenge and always gave me a little grief," Blitzer says.

But Blitzer, with the gut of a great journalist, knows how to give grief to his interview subjects too. The day prior to Blitzer's interview with Bill Bradley, he told *Lifestyles* that he had research two feet high on the presidential candidate.

"I want to know as much about him, or any interview subject, as I can," Blitzer comments. "I only have one chance to ask him tough questions."

One of the questions he later asked

Bradley was whether he believed that the United States should recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. When Bradley responded that he had long supported Jerusalem as Israel's capital, Blitzer had his follow up question ready: "Would you move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem the day after you took office?" Bradley answered, "No."

Unfortunately for Blitzer, the interview he would want most, is one he'll never get: an exclusive with Moses. "I'd love to know what was going on at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments," Blitzer says wryly. "Since Moses did have direct conversations with God, I'd like to know a little bit more about that one."

Although a 52 year-old Blitzer may have missed covering an historical milestone or two, for three decades Blitzer says that he has had a front row seat to the world's greatest show: history in the making. Whether reporting from South Africa in the '80s during Apartheid's darkest hours to return in 1998 to become the only American journalist to interview South Africa's first black president, Nelson Mandela, to the fall of the Soviet Union (ending 74 years of Communism), to

riots at the Western Wall perpetuating over 70 years of Arab-Jewish strife, Blitzer has served as a chronicler of our times. Blitzer's front row seat to history, however, has had its hazards more threatening than getting hit by a foul ball at Yankee Stadium. In 1982, Blitzer, then a correspondent for *The Jerusalem Post*, was covering the war in Lebanon.

"I remember going on that road to Beirut from South Lebanon and only later discovering that there were land mines all over the place," Blitzer relates. "Before you go on an assignment like that you say to yourself, 'What am I doing that for?' But then once you get there, your adrenaline is pumping and you really don't think about it."

As the Pentagon correspondent for CNN from 1990-1992, war was Blitzer's beat. And it was indeed against the backdrop of the Gulf War, that both CNN and Wolf Blitzer became household names to viewers in 220 countries around the globe. Since then Blitzer's more familiar backdrop has been one of the most recognized structures in the world: the White House. For seven years Blitzer served as CNN's White House correspondent covering one of America's most controversial presidents, William Jefferson Clinton.

"When you have a president like Bill Clinton, who is so energetic and who wants to get so much into everyday, I like to say that covering him felt like seven dog years," Blitzer says with a laugh. "It is like covering another president for 95 years." It is little surprise that Clinton, who has reportedly traveled on more foreign trips than any other American President, could burn out a press corps.

But for Blitzer, who had covered the Middle East for over 10 years as the Washington correspondent and Bureau Chief for *The Jerusalem Post*, one of Clinton's greatest international accomplishments took place in Washington itself: the White House lawn handshake for peace between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Even Blitzer himself was not optimistic about peace when he wrote his

book *Between Washington and Jerusalem*. He noted: "[Arabs] are now more sophisticated in their propaganda. No longer do we very often hear blatant Arab declarations calling for the destruction of Israel, as we heard on the eve of the 1967 Six-Day War. Instead of 'Let's throw the Jews into the sea,' there are now subtle code words to express virtually the same intent. Thus, the PLO calls for the establishment of a 'democratic, secular state in Palestine.' Only the more attuned listener recognizes that, in effect, that calls for the end of the State of Israel."

But Blitzer's views have changed dramatically since the '80s in direct correlation to what he believes is a dramatic change in Arafat's and the PLO's position.

"The Arafat who shook hands with Rabin is not the same Arafat who shook hands with Barak, nor even with Netanyahu," Blitzer comments. "Today we have Arafat working with Israel to fight terrorism."

Blitzer recalls his trip to Gaza with Clinton in December of 1998, where Clinton addressed the Palestinian National Council.

"People came to tell me they used to be members of the Popular Front or of various factions of the PLO and believed there could be no two-state solution, i.e., Palestine next to Israel," Blitzer recounts. "But now they believe that it can exist and that there can be peace." Blitzer too now believes there can be peace.

Blitzer is also very much at peace with himself and his own "two-state solution." He's a journalist and a Jew. "I've reported things that were not pleasant about Israel; I've reported things that were not pleasant about the United States," he states. "My policy and CNN's policy is to just report the news as responsibly and objectively as possible."

Ironically, one example of Blitzer's capacity to criticize his "own" can best be found in *Territory of Lies*, his second book published in 1989, an investigative account of the famous espionage case involving the Jewish-American mole,

Jonathan Pollard, who spied for the State of Israel. In his book, although by no means condoning espionage, Blitzer strongly criticizes Israel for its unfair treatment of Pollard. (When Pollard sought refuge at the Israeli embassy, it turned him away only to face the waiting arms of the FBI.)

"My parents always taught me that you don't do anybody any favors by covering up mistakes," Blitzer says, "otherwise people tend to repeat those mistakes."

His parents, as well as his mentors at Reuters where he began his career in Journalism in 1972, taught him well, for Blitzer, who never took one journalism course, has earned numerous awards. These include the Golden Cable ACE Award for his coverage of the Gulf War; an Emmy for his coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, and the International Platform Association's Lowell Thomas Broadcast Journalism Award for outstanding contributions to broadcast journalism.

But the one award that may be the most meaningful to Blitzer's parents, Cesia and David Blitzer, Holocaust survivors, and to both his maternal and paternal grandparents who did not survive WWII, is the award he received November 7, 1999: The Yad Vashem Young Leadership Remembrance Award given to him by the American and International Societies for Yad Vashem at their tribute dinner. A very humble Wolf Blitzer said he doesn't really know why Yad Vashem honored him other than that he is the son of Holocaust survivors. But the organization's chairman, Eli Zborowski, had a very decisive reason for honoring Wolf Blitzer.

"We don't only want to show the horrors of the Holocaust, but also how life flourished before it and how life flourished after it. By showing the survivors we are also showing what was destroyed," Zborowski declared. "How many Wolf Blitzers went to the gas chamber and were burnt like material? How many Wolf Blitzers would there be today if the Nazis hadn't perpetrated these murders?"

But there are some tragedies that

history insists on repeating. Blitzer, with a Master's in International Studies, is confounded by them. In his keynote address at the Yad Vashem Dinner, Blitzer said that the problem with the 20th century was not that it was the century of war, but rather that it was the century of unlearned lessons.

"The Holocaust was by far the worst crime against humanity ever. Since then, people all over the world have vowed never again. But after WWII there has been no shortage of other crimes against humanity, albeit on a smaller scale. Whether 30 years ago in Africa where more than a million Biafrans were slaughtered, or 20 years ago in Cambodia where some two million people were butchered by the Khmer Rouge, or more recently, indeed only five years ago in Rwanda and Burundi where Amnesty International says between 800,000 and 1 million people were killed in only a few months...Can it happen again? Yes! Have we learned the lessons of the Holocaust? No!

"When we hold ourselves accountable...we cease being bystanders," Blitzer said in the same speech. "As the son of Holocaust survivors, I know that I have a special responsibility—for the sake of my parents, but more so for the sake of theirs and those others who did not survive."

This is a great responsibility for Blitzer who otherwise does not have any airs about himself. "I have no pretensions that I am going to find a cure for cancer or bring world peace or harmony or anything like that," Blitzer says. "I just try and give the best reports I can give and hope people walk away from them more informed."

Although his career might have sharpened his mind, it did not go to his head. He is still happily married to his wife Lynn of 26 years and has a college-aged daughter named Ilana.

"I don't see myself as a celebrity or anything like that," Blitzer says. "I just think of myself as a working reporter."

And though everyone recognized Blitzer the night he was interviewed by *Lifestyles*, from the Pakistani New York



(l-r) Father and mother David and Cesia Blitzer, Wolf and wife Lynn with daughter Ilana.

taxi driver to the doormen and front desk clerk at the Essex House hotel in Manhattan, Blitzer remains very modest and down to earth, so much so that he asked why *Lifestyles* wanted to interview him. He even remained calm and polite when the New York Sheraton over-booked guests and did not have room for the travel-weary Blitzer when he arrived at 10 p.m. Where was the wolf in Wolf?

Well, according to Jewish belief, a person's character is implicit in his Hebrew name. When asked if there was any truth to that belief in regard to his own name, Blitzer says that as a journalist he could see some traits of a wolf in himself. "A wolf is an aggressive animal, and I am a fairly aggressive journalist. I try to get it right and I try to get it first," Blitzer maintains. "A wolf is a hungry animal, and I'm still hungry for the big stories." (A wolf also hangs around in packs. Welcome to the press corps.)

Blitzer's name changed several times during his early career but not by his design. His by-line as a Washington correspondent for *The Jerusalem Post* was Wolf Blitzer, which is his real name. But then a left wing Hebrew paper began using the *JP* articles and since "Wolf" looked funny in Hebrew they changed it to Zev, which is Hebrew for Wolf. A few years later *Yediot Achronot*, Israel's largest paper, started publishing his articles and for the sake of variety they changed Blitzer to Barak. Blitz is German and Barak is Hebrew for lightning. His by-line then became Zev Barak

(no relation to Ehud Barak). Within just a few years, his by-line changed three times, but Blitzer was still an award-winning journalist by any other name.

The ever-changing Blitzer has made yet another change. The familiar sound, "This is Wolf Blitzer reporting live from the White House" will be heard no more. Blitzer has given up his spot of seven years standing in front of the White House to assume the more comfortable but ever challenging seat of anchor of *The World Today*, which airs live every week night at 8 p.m. and of *Late Edition* which airs live every Sunday at noon. "I knew for some time that the next step in my career would be anchoring and hosting shows," Blitzer confides. "I didn't want to burn out, and it was time to move on."

But if Blitzer has had to work hard, or give firsthand testimony to some of the greatest tragedies of our time, such as Egypt Air flight 990 or the Oklahoma bombing—which he said was more devastating than anything he had seen in Lebanon—it has always been a labor of love.

"I get to travel all over the world, ask tough leaders tough questions and get paid for doing it in the process," Blitzer says. "It's a thrilling career for me and I just love doing it."

Although that may be Blitzer's "final answer," it is certainly not his final question!

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