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Leon Launched Charn Offensive

by Simon Yaffe

Many people associate the kaddish prayer with death.

But, as Leon Charney found out while researching for his book *The Mystery of the Kaddish*, it was a prayer of celebration and also one adopted in medieval times by rabbis who felt their Judaism was threatened by the Crusades.

American Mr. Charney's idea for the book came around four years ago when he was in a Tel Aviv hotel.

He ran into Israeli television reporter Saul Mayzlish, who had interviewed him before.

Mr. Charney was in mourning for his mother Sara and wanted to know where the nearest minyan was so he could say kaddish.

Mr. Charney and co-author Mayzlish travelled to a number of historically important Jewish sites, both in Israel and Europe.

And they learned stories about how famous rabbis responded to massacres and other forms of persecution, including forced conversions.

Mr. Charney is on the *Forbes' 400* list as one of the wealthiest Americans

New Jersey-born Mr. Charney, 69, is synonymous for his syndicated political talk show, *The Leon Charney Report*, which goes out across America -- and also for his role in helping Israel and Egypt reach a peace agreement in 1977.

An entertainment lawyer by trade, he became an adviser to Senator Vance Hartke and became involved in international politics and diplomacy.

Mr. Charney, who studied at New York's Yeshiva University and Brooklyn Law School before being admitted to the bar in 1965 recalled: "I was fairly known in Israel."

"I had defended Ezer Weizman in a court case and I was a close friend of the Jewish Journalist Wolf Blitzer who worked for CNN."

He was asked by Robert Lipshitz, who was part of President Jimmy Carter's counsel to help with negotiations.

In a forward for one of Mr. Charney's books, Carter referred to him as "the unsung hero of the Camp David Peace Treaty."

Mr. Charney remains rather secretive about how he helped America broker peace between Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and his Egyptian counterpart Anwar El Sadat but he said: "I refer to my efforts as using the back door channels."

He added: To be involved in those peace talks was one of the greatest privileges of my life.

"President Carter called me his unsung hero. That gave me a lot of serenity."

A film about his work in the Camp David Accords is in production -- with Mr. Charney playing himself.

The film is due to be launched at this year's Monte Carlo International Film Festival.

President Carter's book, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* caused widespread condemnation when it was published two years ago, with many criticizing him for alleged anti-semitism.

But Mr. Charney refuted that.

He said: "Jimmy Carter is not anti-semitic. As a religious Christian, he is just obsessive about peace in the Middle East. He is a humanist."

"Most of the people who have criticized him have not even read the book."

"I have it and it is clear that he wants Israel to remain a Jewish state."

"I am closer to him than most American Jews and he had more Jews in his cabinet than many other presidents."

And President Carter was not the only luminary who Mr. Charney negotiated with.

The son of Lithuanian immigrants, Mr. Charney returned to the region where his parents have grown up to speak to the Soviet Union leader Leonid Brezhnev in an effort to let 1,000 Jews leave the country for Israel.

And, in 1966, he travelled to Tunisia, where an exiled Yasser Arafat was based.

Mr. Charney recalled: "(Ezer) Weizman



BOOK: Leon Charney

wanted to test the temperature with him."

"I met him very early one morning and he had all his bodyguards surrounding him."

"I asked him about the Israeli soldiers who were missing in action and he promised me things."

"But with Arafat, he said one thing and did another."

Mr. Charney, who lives in New York with Israeli wife Tzili Doron and their two sons, Mickey and Nati, is also a chazan and sings on Shabbats and festivals in synagogues across America.

The president of the University of Haifa, he said: "Weizman always said to be a Zionist, you have to live in Israel."

"I consider it to be a *mitzvah* to go and live there -- my mother emigrated to Israel when she was 70."

"But I am a traditional Jew and a Zionist -- even if Weizman did not agree with me."

■ *The Mystery of the Kaddish*, by Leon H. Charney and Saul Mayzlish, is published by JR Books, priced £14.99