

Ephraim Katzir is visiting professor for 2 months

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The former president of the State of Israel sat in a cramped office on the fourth floor of the Basic Science Building at the University of California, San Diego and talked longingly of his return to the fields he loves most—chemistry, biochemistry and biophysics.

Ephraim Katzir, 62, born in Kiev, Ukraine, resident of Israel since 1922, distinguished biochemist and teacher, president of his struggling nation for five years, is a visiting professor at UC San Diego for two months.

He looks upon it as a time of transition from the official duties as head of state to a return to active research in his laboratory at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot as well as to teaching at the University of Tel Aviv.

"During my five years as President (1973-78) I couldn't work actively in science," Katzir said. "Nevertheless, I read journals and kept in close contact with my scientific colleagues and succeeded in publishing a few scientific papers.

"But before returning to active science," he continued, "I felt I should take time off to visit laboratories, talk with distinguished scientists and their collaborators, and, when possible, stay on campuses.

"This will give me the opportunity on the one hand to see the progress in the areas in which I am interested and also give me the opportunity to crystalize in my own mind the type of research I want to do."

Katzir was one of the founders of the Weizman Institute and during his quarter century of teaching and research there he has made outstanding contributions to the understanding of the structure and function of proteins through the preparation and study of the physical, chemical and biological properties of synthetic polypeptides.

The former member of the Jewish Self-Defense Forces (Hagana) and former scientific advisor to the various governments in Israel was asked by the late Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, to run for president of the country and he accepted,

"I felt a sense of responsibility to serve the people of Israel directly," Katzir said.

Thus, on April 11, 1973, Katzir became the fourth President of Israel and continued the tradition of having that office occupied by a scientist/scholar.

"The tradition got started because the Jewish people have a tremendous respect for learning, and as the law says the President is to represent his country, It is no wonder that Jewish people wanted to be represented by an intellectual rather than by an army chief of staff.

"The President has a number of official duties. Perhaps the most important of these is after the election he must choose a member of the Parliament (Knesset) who is asked to form a government. If this person succeeds in forming one he then becomes Prime Minister.

"He must also sign all laws, appoint all ambassadors, and greet all official guests in the country," Katzir continued.

"But the unofficial duties were, for me, every bit as important as the official ones," he said. "The president is supposed to encourage volunteering in various organizations; he is supposed to visit places in the country to encourage every good deed which is of national importance, and his office is supposed to act as a kind of a shrine to which every important contribution to the country will be brought. If a writer or a scientist has written an important book, they will always bring it first to the president.

"And, most importantly, he is supposed to keep alive the Israeli dream of a moral and just society. He must discuss the dream, encourage people to dream and encourage people to do things to realize the dream."

Katzir plans to deliver and participate in scientific seminars as well as meet with colleagues during his stay at UC San Diego. He is scheduled to give a public talk "Experiences of a Scientist as Nation's President" March 12, at 8 p.m. in Third College Lecture Hall 107.

He has won numerous awards and honors and seven honorary doctorates from Universities in America and Israel. He is a member of both the Israeli and American National Academies of Science, the Royal Society of London, the New York Academy of Science, and several other organizations.

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