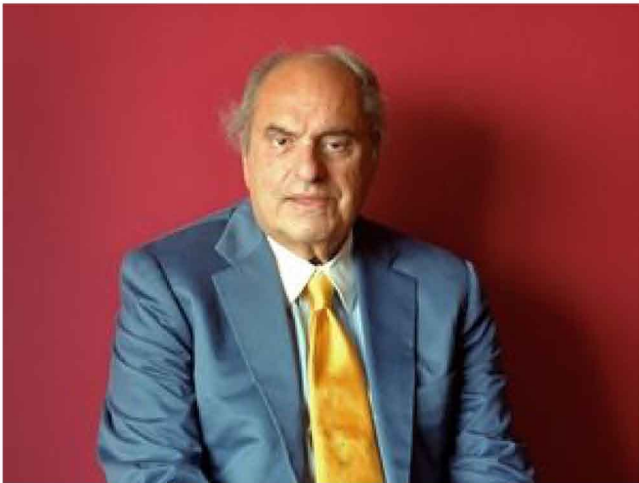


## Billionaire real estate investor Leon Charney dies at 77

Owner of One Times Square and 1441 Broadway had assembled 1.5 million square feet of commercial space in the city

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Bloomberg News



*Courtesy of Leon Charney Media Foundation*

Charney was a real estate investor and public television host, and described himself as an unofficial adviser to Jimmy Carter

**Published:** March 23, 2016 - 10:57 am

Leon Charney, a billionaire owner of Manhattan real estate and supporter of Israel who became a familiar face to viewers of New York City public television, has died. He was 77.

He died March 21, according to an online death notice. No cause was given.

The son of a sewing-supplies salesman, Charney assembled a real-estate portfolio that included three skyscrapers in Times Square, including 1441 Broadway, and a total of 1.5 million square feet of commercial space, according to *Forbes* magazine, which estimates his current net worth at \$1 billion. His first purchase, in 1980, was One Times Square, the wedge-shaped building famous each New Year's Eve for hosting the

glittering ball that descends at midnight.

Starting in 1988, Charney hosted *The Leon Charney Report* on WNYC, New York City's public-TV network. The one-hour interview show focused heavily on Middle East and Jewish affairs, with a guest list that included former Israeli Prime Ministers Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak, as well as former New York City Mayors Ed Koch, David Dinkins and Rudolph Giuliani.

### 'Back-door channel'

Charney relished recounting his own role in Middle East affairs, describing himself as a behind-the-scenes player and unofficial adviser to U.S. President Jimmy Carter during the negotiations that led to the Camp David Accords, which established peace between Israel and Egypt. In a 1984 book, *Special Counsel*, he detailed how he had "fashioned an informal and unpublicized back-door channel between the

White House”—where his contact was the president’s counsel, Robert Lipshutz—and the Israeli military leadership.

“I contributed my time and paid for all my expenses simply because I felt it my duty as an American Jew,” he wrote in his book. He told the *New York Times* in 1985 that his interest in Israel was heightened by the fact that his mother, his sister and her three children lived there.

The Jerusalem Post called Charney’s 1991 marriage in Tel Aviv to Tzili Doron, costume design director of the Cameri Theater, “the wedding of the holiday season.” Among the witnesses for Charney were Rabin and former Defense Minister Ezer Weizman.

## **UPI bid**

In 1992, Charney made a last-minute bid for the financially ailing United Press International news service. After religious broadcaster Pat Robinson withdrew a \$6 million offer for UPI, Charney put down \$180,000 to keep the agency running for 10 more days. In the end, the \$3.75 million bid by Charney and his partners was turned down by a bankruptcy judge in favor of a \$3.95 million bid by the Middle East Broadcasting Centre.

Leon Harris Charney was born July 23, 1938, in Bayonne, New Jersey, to Morris and Sara Charney. He recalled in his memoir that his father had “almost a daily ritual to bring out of the closet his U.S. citizenship papers and fondle them lovingly.”

Charney graduated from Yeshiva University in 1960 and Brooklyn Law School in 1964, helping to finance his education by singing in synagogues. He started his own law firm representing sports and show-business personalities, among them Jackie Mason and Sammy Davis Jr.

During six years as a special counsel to U.S. Senator Vance Hartke, an Indiana Democrat, Charney established ties to international figures including Golda Meir, the prime minister of Israel. He said he worked with Meir to free Jewish dissidents from the Soviet Union and help them relocate to Israel.

## **Tunisia meeting**

Charney also said he traveled in secrecy to Tunisia in 1986 to meet with Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, in one of the first efforts to make peace between the PLO and Israel.

In 2008, Charney made his first appearance on the *Forbes* list of richest Americans, with a net worth the magazine estimated at \$1.5 billion. His “stable tenant base and aversion to debt” shielded him from the worst of the collapse in the commercial real estate market, *Forbes* said in 2010. It said Charney also described himself as the largest U.S. individual trader, by volume, of Ginnie Mae mortgage-backed securities.

In addition to his wife, survivors include his sister, Bryna, and sons Mickey and Nati.

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