

A black and white close-up portrait of Yitzhak Rabin, an elderly man with white hair, looking slightly to the right. He has his hand near his chin in a thoughtful pose. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

# **The Life and Legacy of Yitzhak Rabin**

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# **The Life and Legacy of Yitzhak Rabin**

*Edited by*

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## Introduction

*Lorin Bell-Cross, assistant editor of Fathom*

The weeks and months building up to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin saw widespread incitement against the Prime Minister. Rallies against the prime minister and peace process regularly featured screams of 'traitor' and 'murderer'. This peaked at an opposition rally in Zion Square in Jerusalem, where banners from the crowd depicted Rabin in an SS officer's uniform.

In an effort to show public support for the peace process, an enormous peace rally was held in Kings of Israel Square in Tel Aviv on 4 November 1995. 'This rally must send a message to the Israeli public, to the Jewish community throughout the world, to many, many in the Arab world and throughout the entire world, that the people of Israel want peace, support peace, and for that, I thank you very much,' were the final words of Rabin's speech to the rally. As he left, Rabin was shot three times by Jewish extremist Yigal Amir. News of his death was met with an outpouring of shock and sadness.

This deep sense of loss was not limited to the Israel, but was felt across the world. US President Bill Clinton encapsulated the mood: 'because words cannot express my true feelings, let me just say shalom, chaver – goodbye, friend.' His death was mourned too by old adversaries. King Hussein of Jordan said at Rabin's funeral: 'I had never thought that the moment would come like this when I would grieve the loss of a brother, a colleague and a friend – a man, a soldier who met us on the opposite side of a divide whom we respected as he respected us. A man I came to know because I realized, as he did, that we have to cross over the divide, establish a dialogue, get to know each other and strive to leave for those who follow us a legacy that is worthy of them. And so we did. And so we became brethren and friends.'

Perhaps as a consequence of the circumstances of his assassination, Rabin today is associated internationally largely with the pursuit of peace. Less-often recalled are his realism and unrelenting commitment to the security of the State of Israel. Rabin was no naïve and idealistic peacenik – during the First Intifada he reportedly ordered the IDF to break the bones of Palestinian stone-throwers in order to restore deterrence. His willingness to compromise and pursue an agreement with Israel's neighbours came from his calculated belief that the circumstances were right for an agreement, that it was possible to achieve, and that it was in Israel's interest to do so.

Now, 20 years on from his assassination, the question is often asked, 'Did the peace process die with Rabin?' At face value no: Israeli governments continued to negotiate with the Palestinians in order to keep the vision of peace alive: Ehud Barak in 2000 and 2001, Ehud Olmert in 2008. Even Benjamin Netanyahu, who himself bitterly opposed the Oslo Accords, signed agreements which continued the process with the PLO as Prime Minister in 1997 and 1998, spoke in his 2009 Bar-Ilan speech of two states for two peoples, and in 2013 entered into US-sponsored peace talks.

However, we are far away from the short-lived optimism of the 1990s, best symbolised by the iconic photograph of Rabin and Arafat shaking hands on the lawn of the White House. After repeated failure to reach an agreement, relations between the Israelis and the Palestinians are at a low. Furthermore, the Middle East today is in a state of turmoil and insecurity, with states collapsing and extremist non-state actors filling the void, creating an unpromising environment for a diplomatic breakthrough.

That said, we still live, undoubtedly, in a post-Rabin Middle East. The Palestinian Authority created by the Oslo Accords still functions, and its on-going security cooperation with Israel is a key factor that has

controlled violence and extremism in the West Bank in the last ten years. What's more, two thirds of the Israeli public still agree in principle with a two-state solution, a position that was accepted only by a minority on the Left before Rabin signed the Oslo agreements. Moreover, some of the factors which drove Rabin to pursue the Oslo process are even more pronounced today: the rise of Islamic extremism which he anticipated continues, creating an ever greater incentive for Israel and moderate Arab states and actors to work together.

The content of this eBook is drawn from those who had direct knowledge of Rabin and those who were inspired by him. It aims to offer an insight into Rabin the man, the soldier and the Prime Minister and to offer some thoughts on his legacy today.

Our forward is an article by Reuven Rivlin, President of the State of Israel, first published in Hebrew in Yediot Ahronot.

Uri Dromi, Rabin's former spokesperson recalls the special qualities he saw up close that made Rabin an extraordinary statesman, and explains why Rabin set aside his own deep reservations in signing the Oslo Accords.

Luciana Berger, Labour MP and member of the Shadow Cabinet, writes on the importance of Rabin's legacy outside of Israel.

On his contributions to Israel, the significance of his assassination and how to revive his legacy we conducted a symposium involving Tzipi Livni, Omer Bar Lev, Einat Wilf, Michael Herzog, Ronen Hoffman and Sara Hirchhorn.

In a glimpse into Rabin the person, we have reproduced Sir Martin Gilbert's account of accompanying him around the Churchill War Rooms and to gain insight into Rabin the strategist, Shlomo Avineri exposes the rationale which inspired his political actions.

To celebrate the life of Yitzhak Rabin we present a photo essay of key moments, and to celebrate his legacy we present the text of his 1994 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

## Foreword

### *Reuven Rivlin, President of the State of Israel*

Twenty years after that terrible night when Yitzhak Rabin (of blessed memory) was murdered, I have been asked to put my thoughts in writing. The passing time has not dulled the sharp feelings, and sit here with trembling hands. They are trembling because 20 years have passed since the Israeli compass was disturbed, and the needle has still not settled. When I wonder in what path we have been walking since that night, doubts still run through me, and it seems that the echoes of that scream, that tore through the country's sky, are still resonating.

'Everyone has a name ... given to him by his work,' wrote the poet Zelda, 'and given to him by his death.' Yitzhak Rabin, too, has a name given to him by his life and his deeds, and a name given to him by his death. And these names are different. In my words I seek to reflect on the name given to him by his death, by his murder by a Jewish assassin.

Since he was murdered, the memory of Rabin's heritage has been a matter of deep public controversy. At one end stand those who demand that the political facet of the murder be emphasised and the conflict between left and right be accentuated. Against them stand those who seek to emphasise all that is wrong in letting conflicts slip into violence and demand that the discourse be channelled to the importance of an inclusive, pluralist culture. I belong to that latter group.

Rabin was not murdered because of the man he was or because of the beliefs and ideas he held. The assassin regarded him as a national symbol and shot him wishing to undermine the decision-making abilities of Israel's democratic government. That murder was not only a traumatic experience that must not be forgotten, but also a decisive national breaking point.

That terrible night affected me by making me realise that the threat of violent conflict was not vague and distant. That murder represented for me, and for all of Israel, a huge warning sign that cried out, albeit in hindsight, that we were doing things wrong. In the years following the murder I realised how closely we must touch upon those carcinogenic lesions that threaten to metastasise through the body of Israeli democracy, if we wish to remove them.

When recalling the atmosphere of those days, before and after the murder, it is clear that we were divided not by the rules of the game, but by a gaping abyss. We had no common language, no common vision and we could not point at shared values. We each thought we were right, and would not consider the effects of such a conflict on society.

In recent decades, our society has been changing. It is divided into political, nationalistic, cultural and ethnic tribes. Yet this tribal division obliges us to examine its social and ethical ramifications. We must ask what is common to the sectors that make up Israeli society. Do we have a joint civic language, a common ethos, a common ethical denominator that might unite these groups?

Anyone who refuses to ask these questions is ignoring the most significant challenge currently faced by Zionism. If we wish to live, we must bravely stare at this reality and be willing to find answers together; be willing to bring together all the tribes of Israel in a vision of hope and partnership. More than ever before,

we need a leadership that does not lose its voice, that can stand up to its public and which does not lose its inner compass, especially during a storm.

The road to building these foundations is long and hard, but if we believe we have been destined – not sentenced – to live together, we will conquer the challenge.

*This is translated from an article that appeared in Yediot Ahronot on 25 October 2015. It is extracted from a longer essay in Three Shots and Twenty Years, edited by Anita Shapira and Nurit Cohen-Levinovsky, published by the Yitzhak Rabin Centre and Am Oved.*

## ONE

# A statesman not a politician: remembering Yitzhak Rabin

*Uri Dromi*

*In an intimate account, Uri Dromi, who was foreign press spokesman to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, recalls the special qualities he saw up close that made Rabin an extraordinary statesman, and explains why Rabin set aside his own deep reservations in signing the Oslo Accords.*

We flew to Washington for the White House signing of the Oslo Accords overnight, on an aging Israeli air force plane. It was the same plane Rabin and his staff usually took whenever he travelled as prime minister. His aides and the press were accustomed to uncomfortable nights cramped in their seats. Only Rabin, and his wife Leah when she travelled with him, had any comfort. The Prime Minister enjoyed a curtained off compartment with a bed. We would typically see him changed into pyjamas, saying goodnight, perhaps enjoying a nightcap, before disappearing into his compartment where he would sleep like a baby, arriving at his destination fresh and ready to work.

This flight was different. Rabin disappeared into his compartment as usual, whilst Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, who never seemed to sleep, worked the media at the back of the plane. But this time sleep did not come easily to Rabin. I saw him come in and out of his cabin, visiting the restroom, looking for another drink, clearly more agitated than normal. The following morning, as I watched his hesitant handshake with Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn, it struck me how deep his reservations were about the commitment he was entering into on behalf of the State of Israel.

The news of the Oslo Accords, and Rabin's endorsement of them, came as a great surprise even to those of us working in his team. It was unlike him to enter into an agreement that would put an element of Israel's security into the hands of anyone else, much less into the hands of the Palestinians and Yasser Arafat.

Rabin was 'Mr. Security', whose determination to deal with terrorism was beyond doubt. Indeed, his uncompromising attitude to terrorists made life difficult for me, as his spokesman to the foreign media. The most notable event in the early period of Rabin's term was his decision to expel 400 Hamas and Islamic Jihad operatives to Lebanon. When the Lebanese refused to admit them, they were left stranded on the border, leaving us with a public relations disaster. In December of 1992 he convened his staff to consider whether doctors from the Red Cross should be allowed to visit them. Thinking of the international media I urged him to agree, but he was not impressed. "Will this bring to an end the Intifada?" he barked. It was a revealing moment for me. I understood he was only really interested in what was right for Israel's security, and how things looked to the rest of the world was a much lower priority. But I also understood how concerned he was by the Intifada, and the need to bring it to an end.

Watching this leader – for whom Israel's security was everything – make the transition from reluctantly accepting negotiations with the PLO, at the urging of Shimon Peres, to becoming sold on the Oslo Accords, was fascinating.

To key to understanding why he agreed to Oslo is another aspect of Rabin's personality: his capacity to see the bigger picture. Even as Prime Minister in the 1970s, according to the account of then-Foreign Ministry Director General Shlomo Avineri, Rabin recognised even then the need to separate from the Palestinians

to preserve Israel's character as a Jewish and democratic state. However, in the immediate wake of the bruising 1973 Yom Kippur War, he did not feel that the time was right. Come the 1990s, Rabin saw an imperative to move forward and an opportunity. The context was the end of the Cold War, the decline of the Soviet enemy, and the rise of the new threats of Islamic extremism, which called for Israel build alliances with moderate states on its borders. Rabin also feared a decline of national resilience and sense of purpose within Israel, augmented by the corrosive effects of the First Intifada.

For Rabin the peace process was not something to come at expense of Israel's security, it was a calculated risk intended to enhance Israel's security in the long-run, given the changing nature of the threats both regionally, with the Palestinians, and within Israeli society.

Rabin's ability to take fateful decisions for the future of his country in light of the bigger picture was one of the characteristics that marked him out from other political leaders. For those of us who saw him work at first hand, it was obvious that we were in the presence of as a statesman, as opposed to a mere politician.

His concern was always first and foremost what was good for the country. The matter of his own political survival – which preoccupies so many other politicians – was much less important for him. He did not enjoy the Knesset and hated managing party politics. We saw in his office how little time he gave to party figures, however much he may have needed them. For Rabin, what mattered were the affairs of state, and this is what he gave his time to. He poured into the details of every issue before coming to a decision.

For those of us working for him he was very tough, and could be hot tempered. If he was displeased with something you had done, you would hear about it. But he was never petty, and it was never personal. His integrity shone through for everyone he dealt with, including the Palestinians and Yasser Arafat, who I believe regarded Rabin with a mixture of respect and even fear.

His natural discomfort with masking the truth made his encounters with the foreign press an interesting experience. When I would bring leading international journalists to be briefed by him, I could always tell when he was obscuring something because he would noticeably blush.

Statesmen of Rabin's stature are rare in politics today. But I believe that the basic conclusion Rabin reached about the need to separate from the Palestinians is now clearer than ever. The necessity for Israel to return to a proactive path to change the status quo will, I believe, ultimately generate an Israeli leadership ready to emulate Rabin and take the tough decisions.

## TWO

# Why Rabin matters today

*Luciana Berger*

It is hard to believe that it is 20 years since the world heard the devastating news that Yitzhak Rabin had been murdered. That he died at the hands of a terrorist because he dared to work for peace made the news all the more tragic. For so many of my generation, it is a moment that is seared in our memories.

I recall standing in the newly-named Rabin Square a couple of years after the assassination. It was a balmy Tel Aviv night, and together with a group of young people we lifted our *yahrzeit* (memorial) candles to the skies, our personal memorial to a man whose life was so cruelly taken from us. This was the same square – then called Kings of Israel Square – where a peace rally had ended with the three terrible shots that murdered Rabin.

Rabin's death came just six weeks after the signing of the Oslo II Accord, and just two years after the iconic photographs of Rabin and Arafat shaking hands, as President Clinton, with his arms outstretched, looked on. For anyone in their teens, flushed with the hope of a lasting peace between Israel and her neighbours, it was the moment our excitement and hopes for Israelis and Palestinians to live side by side in peace, gave way to the realisation that the path to peace would be long and treacherous. Twenty years on, sadly, we are still not there yet.

As President Clinton said in his eulogy: 'Yitzhak Rabin lived the history of Israel. Throughout every trial and triumph, the struggle for independence, the wars for survival, the pursuit of peace and all, he served on the front lines, this son of David and of Solomon, took up arms to defend Israel's freedom and laid down his life to secure Israel's future.'

He was the first prime minister of Israel to be born in the historic land of Israel, in Jerusalem in 1922, then under the British mandate. He grew up in Tel Aviv in the 1920s and 1930s, as a supporter of socialist-Zionism, the belief in the safety and security of the Jewish people in their national home, alongside a commitment to a democratic and fair society at peace with its neighbours. He joined Poale Zion, the workers party, and a socialist-Zionist youth movement which was linked to the trade union movement. These beliefs shaped his world-view.

His political career included an Ambassadorship to the USA and a brief ministerial role in Golda Meir's government in 1974 before, following her resignation, being catapulted into his first term as prime minister. His time in office saw the signing of the Sinai Interim Agreement in 1975, which eventually led to peace between Israel and Egypt. He also oversaw the spectacular Operation Entebbe in 1976, when Israeli commandoes successfully freed hostages held by terrorists on a plane which had been diverted to Uganda.

It is his second period of office as prime minister, after 1992, for which I will remember him most. He won the Nobel Peace Prize, alongside Yasser Arafat and Shimon Peres, for his work to secure the Oslo Accords. This agreement created the Palestinian Authority and recognised the PLO as Israel's partner for negotiations. It was a bold, seismic peace deal, which ultimately cost Rabin his life.

Rabin led Israel into the Oslo Accords in the face of formidable opposition, and grave personal and political risk which he fully understood.

Rabin knew the security risks for Israel inherent in the Oslo Accords; but he also saw the opportunity to create a lasting peace, not only with the Palestinians, but with Israel's other neighbours including Jordan. He understood how valuable peace would be to Israel, in the face of the growing threats of Islamist extremism which he identified even then. He understood that inaction also involved risk and that it would be an abdication of what he believed to be the responsibility of political leadership.

Rabin was a man driven to politics not for personal advancement, but by strong convictions and a desire to do what was right for his country.

Steadfast, committed to his vision, he remains an inspiration to all of us who believe peace is possible. Rabin represents a tradition of socialist-Zionism which is more relevant than ever in modern-day Israel. Even in these dark times, with the violence we see on our TV screens on an almost daily basis, we have to believe that Israel will one day live in peace and security alongside its neighbours, and the Palestinians will gain a viable state. There is no realistic alternative.

In 1996 Israeli songwriter Naomi Shemer translated the metaphorical poem 'O Captain! My Captain!' (written by Walt Whitman) into Hebrew and set it to music to mark the anniversary of Rabin's assassination. The song is heard each November as we commemorate Rabin. The famous lines run:

'O Captain! My Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up – for you the flag is flung – for you the bugle trills;  
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths – for you the shores a-crowding;  
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning.'

But in the poem, the captain is dead.

Yitzhak Rabin was murdered by an extremist, unprepared to accept that a new, better world was possible. He left behind a nation in mourning, but fortified by the conviction that men and women could live together in freedom. We can never know what he would have achieved if he had not died. But we do know this: the passing of this inspirational and brave leader from the world is a wrong that can never be righted. Our challenge is to ensure that we, whatever the challenges, remember his legacy, his leadership and his bravery and continue to strive for two states for two people, living side by side in peace.

## THREE

# Rabin Symposium

### *Omer Bar-Lev*

**Lorin Bell-Cross:** Looking back on the life of Yitzhak Rabin what stands out to you as his outstanding contribution to the State of Israel?

**Omer Bar-Lev:** I think that his outstanding contributions were in his last years as Prime Minister: he made the very important and difficult decision to reach a compromise with the Palestinians and to sign a peace agreement with Jordan.

These were both topics that I was personally involved in. I was in the IDF at that time and was part of the Israeli military team that negotiated the first agreement with the Palestinians after the Oslo Accords – the Gaza-Jericho Agreement – and was also a part of the Israeli military team that negotiated the military aspects of the peace agreement with Jordan, so I was very much involved in the details.

Of course the details of the agreement are very important, but in the end these are all tactics, and the big strategic decision that Rabin made – to come to an agreement – was because of his military background and time as Chief of Staff of the IDF. It meant giving up some of our long-held beliefs and putting them aside because the peace and the security of Israel are more important.

He understood that in the end peace is the most important and essential part in the security of the country and the only way to achieve it is to negotiate and even to compromise with your enemies. I believe that he did it – apart from his personal belief that as a human being every one of us wants peace – from Israel's security point of view and this is what led his and our strategic decisions.

Rabin understood that peace is part of the security of Israel, because there is no complete security as long as you have enemies that are trying to destroy you.

**LBC:** What was the significance of the assassination of Rabin for the peace process, although it continued after Rabin through Camp David, Annapolis and most recently with Secretary Kerry, do you think it would have turned out differently if he had not been killed and if so, why or why not?

**OBL:** There's an old question, 'Do leaders make history or does history make the leader?' I think the answer to that is sometimes leaders change history and make a new future.

It's very difficult to assess what would have happened if Rabin was not assassinated, but I'm not 100 per cent sure that the peace process would have continued very differently. I know that the common assumption is that the assassination stopped the peace process and if Rabin was not assassinated then everything would have been different. I believe it's more complicated than that.

I'm sure that things would have been different, but how different I'm not sure. Let's not forget that in order to achieve complete peace and end the conflict, it's not enough for the Israeli side to be ready: the Palestinian side and the leader on the Palestinian side would have to be ready to make this compromise and I'm not sure that Arafat was ready to do that, or wanted to.

**LBC:** Although there were risks, Rabin chose to attempt pursue a path of negotiated coexistence with the Palestinians. Is there a way back to that path from the situation we're in today and if so how would it be done?

**OBL:** I don't see any other way to implement a Zionist vision, which is that Israel should be a Jewish state. To be a Jewish and democratic state Israel has to have a clear Jewish majority. I do not see any other way to implement this vision apart from getting back and completing what Rabin began.

People say that perhaps we've passed the point of no return and so on; I don't believe that. The whole spirit of Zionism since Herzl's vision was challenging the present, challenging the obvious and envisioning things that, at the time, were very difficult to comprehend could even be reached.

Looking back at the peace agreement with Egypt and the peace agreement with Jordan I believe the spirit of Zionism is about challenging the present and the future. Because I believe this, I believe that even if it takes more time – and there is no question that as time goes by it is getting more and more difficult – we will achieve that and we will separate from the Palestinians.

## *Michael Herzog*

**Toby Greene:** Looking back on the life of Yitzhak Rabin, what stands out to you as his outstanding contribution to the State of Israel?

**Michael Herzog:** There are a number of outstanding contributions made by Yitzhak Rabin. First, in the realm of security, his contribution was very significant.

Rabin was a soldier, commander and a warrior. He began his career before the establishment of the State of Israel in the Jewish paramilitary forces, the Palmach and the Haganah. He was a commander of a brigade in the Haganah during the War of Independence, which played an essential role in securing the road to Jerusalem and ultimately allowing Israel to keep its capital in Jerusalem.

He then had a long military career before becoming the Chief of Staff of the Israel Defence Forces. Rabin was not only a warrior and a commander; he was a force builder who played a major role in the build-up, composition and training of the IDF. He had a deep understanding that for a military to win a war it had to be professional and to train constantly.

He really contributed to this becoming a part of the IDF's DNA, leading to the unprecedented victory in the Six Day War.

When Rabin became prime minister he made another significant contribution in trying to reconcile Israel's security needs and interests with an effort to bring about peace agreements with the Palestinians and to complete the cycle of peace with our immediate neighbours.

He signed a peace agreement with Jordan in 1994, securing peace on our longest border, and he tried very hard with Palestinians and Syrians. He epitomised a very unique combination of seeking peace while guarding Israel's security interests. I think he had a deep understanding of the relationship between peace and security. He understood that peace does not automatically produce security, and it has to be fortified by solid security arrangements, and at the same time he understood that solid security arrangements

contributed to peace. That combination makes him different to any of his successors.

Rabin was also one of the first to understand early on the nature of the Iranian threat to the State of Israel, specifically the existential threat of the Iranian nuclear programme. That developed a theme in his mind that for Israel to be better positioned to deal with this kind of threat, it had to try and complete the cycle of peace with its immediate neighbours – that's a lesson that remains relevant to this very day.

It does not mean that Israel doesn't have military or intelligence answers to the Iranian threat, but it would be in a much better position to deal with that threat if it had peaceful relations with its immediate neighbours.

**TG:** What was the significance of the assassination of Rabin to the peace process, though it continued after Rabin, would it have turned out differently if he had not been killed and why?

**MH:** This is a very hard question. It is impossible to tell how things would have developed had he not been assassinated and I say this because Rabin had a very difficult partner in Yasser Arafat.

Arafat – the leader of the Palestinian National Movement – in his heart did not recognise Israel's right to exist as the nation state of the Jewish people. Arafat believed that in a very long historic process Israel would disappear and that the best way to deal with Israel should be through a mix of diplomacy and terror, as we saw through the years of the Second Intifada.

Nonetheless, I think it's fair to assume that reality would have developed differently. When Rabin was at the helm, he navigated the peace process with very steady hand, epitomising a very unique mix of peace and security. His approach was very careful and very incremental. He did not believe in a major leap forward where you can break your head. He believed in a step by step approach and that after so many decades of hostilities and violence you have to test the ground and move on carefully.

He was respected by the Palestinians who knew that he would honour his word. They realised that he was not looking down on them but regarded them as partners, while strictly guarding Israel's national interests. Rabin enjoyed the trust of the Israeli public and the international community, and was respected by the Palestinians. This was a combination which never repeated itself after Rabin.

If you ask me could Rabin have reached a permanent status agreement with Palestinians, I'm not sure, especially given Arafat's attitude. I'm not sure that Rabin – with his mindset that a peace agreement should strengthen Israel's security and not undermine Israel's security – could have bridged all the gaps with the Palestinians. But I do believe that had Rabin stayed on long enough, the State of Israel would have been in a better place.

**TG:** Rabin in his life never talked about a Palestinian state as such, but do you think in his mind he recognised that that was the ultimate destination of any final status agreement?

**MH:** I think so, yes. He did not speak about a Palestinian state when I was part of the team negotiating under his guidance, and we were never told that this was the ultimate goal. But we understood that implicitly this is where it should lead to. The Interim Agreement that was signed under Rabin in 1995 actually defined the transition process to the negotiations on a permanent status agreement, so it was clear that when we reached that point of negotiating permanent status we would discuss a Palestinian state. He was very careful not to talk about it at the time and spoke of other types of solutions but I think everybody understood that if the Interim Agreement succeeds this was where it should lead to. Naturally if it doesn't succeed then it doesn't happen.

**TG:** Though aware of the risks, Rabin chose to attempt to pursue a path of negotiated coexistence with the Palestinians. Is there a way back to that path from the situation we're in today and if so how?

**MH:** I'm very doubtful that in the foreseeable future we can go back to the same path of a negotiated deal. We had three major attempts at reaching a permanent status agreement resolving all the core issues between us and the Palestinians. One in 2000 between Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat at Camp David, one in 2008 between Olmert and Abu Mazen [Palestinian President Abbas], and the recent one in 2013-14 between Netanyahu and Abu Mazen, the so called Kerry led-process. We failed in all three of them and failure has a price. Failure has left scars with all participants and people have less and less faith and confidence in the future of the peace process and the prospects of reaching a breakthrough and ultimately peace between the parties.

To look back at how we negotiated you can see how things deteriorated over time. When Israel and the Palestinians negotiated permanent status agreements in 2000 and 2008 there were no preconditions for negotiations. In fact, Israel built much more on the ground then in terms of settlement activity than today. When we negotiated in 2013-14 Israel had to choose one of three preconditions: the release of political prisoners, a settlement freeze, or accepting the 1967 borders as the baseline for territorial negotiations and Israel chose the first.

If we negotiate today, we'll meet all three preconditions and more; preconditions which will be very hard for any Israeli government to accept. So there is no confidence between the two leaderships and the gap between the two sides is widening.

There are many ideas about how to deal with this challenge, including a series of measures on the ground as well as new proposals that make use of the fact that we have converging interests with major Arab actors, to try and establish a regional architecture and regional context for dealing with Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They're all very good ideas but, ultimately, to secure peace you will need Israelis and Palestinians to sit down and agree to it. It cannot be imposed from the outside.

## *Sara Hirschhorn*

**Alan Johnson:** Looking back on the life of Yitzhak Rabin, what stands out to you as his most outstanding contribution to the State of Israel?

**Sara Hirschhorn:** Rabin certainly had a long and illustrious career in civil service and military service. What stands out for me is his assertion that you don't make peace with your friends, you make peace with your enemies. He was honest about the difficulties of the process and he gave both the people of Israel and the Palestinians an opportunity to reckon with each other – understanding that they had to go forward based on a very difficult history, but that there was a path to peace in the future.

Unfortunately, I think his most outstanding contribution, at least for my generation, was more in his death than in his life. He symbolised the hope and the understanding that peace could be within reach. Even when I visit his grave on Mount Herzl today I see young people, who might not even have been born during Rabin's tenure, flocking to the site to light candles and to pray for peace – they really still see him as the symbol of what may have been.

Certainly he shaped my life. Rabin's death was the 'where were you when Kennedy was shot' moment for

my generation; he really inspired me both personally and professionally to be on the path that I am today. Lastly, his other contribution may have been to raise the alarm about the depths of the opposition within the Jewish-Zionist camp to the peace process and the difficult steps that would have to be taken.

**AJ:** What do you think was the significance of his assassination for the peace process itself? Obviously it continued; we went on to have Camp David and Annapolis but there's a debate isn't there: would the peace process have turned out differently if he had not been killed?

**SH:** I don't like to indulge in this kind of counter-factual history. The truth is he was assassinated, the Oslo process fell apart. I was living in Israel at the time, as a teenager, when this was taking place and we've had 20 years of a sad and deadly history since then that we have to grapple with.

We need to think about the conditions and the characters that made peace possible at that moment in time in the mid-1990s. The peace process was far more than Rabin the character. It was a moment when coalition politics in Israel provided a domestic opening to allow the Oslo Accords to be passed in the Knesset; it was the end of the Cold War and there were other regional conditions which gave Palestinians the opportunity to pursue this course; and there was the kind of international leadership that could shepherd the process along. Rabin was at the centre of this context and he brought the will, stamina and credibility that no other Israeli leader – and perhaps no other Palestinian leader either – has possessed to move the process forward. In that sense he was really pivotal and we really don't know what might have happened had he survived.

**AJ:** Do you think there's a way back today to the kind of negotiated coexistence that Rabin talked about and what does that path look like to you, to make something of that legacy?

**SH:** I truly believe that, at the end of the day, while both sides certainly want to fulfil their national aspirations they also want peace and stability. Whenever I sit on a bus in central Jerusalem or I take the bus to Ramallah, I see mothers sitting with their children and I truly believe that each one of them wants a better life for their child and to not live in the fear of war.

The technical solutions to the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that were part of the Oslo process remain in place, so as long as both sides continue to commit to a two-state framework, there's not a lot of new thinking that needs to be done.

But it's also a war of narrative: since Oslo, the ability for Israelis and Palestinians to see one another both physically and metaphorically has declined. The checkpoints and the separation barrier have literally segregated the two populations and there are very few zones in which there is actual human interaction. There's also a deliberate desire on both sides to refuse to see each other's humanity and to understand the challenges that each side faces and their desires to fulfil their own aspirations.

While these peer-to-peer programmes which used to exist during Oslo can't bring peace alone, I think it is imperative for each side to recognise 'the other'. Whether that's their history, their national aspirations, their desires, their commonalities as well as their differences, it is really a must and bridging those gaps is essential to finding the road back to peace in the future.

## *Ronen Hoffman*

**Toby Greene:** Looking back on the life of Yitzhak Rabin, what stands out for you as his outstanding contribution to the State of Israel?

**Ronen Hoffman:** Yitzhak Rabin made a very unique contribution to the State of Israel on several levels. First of all he was a man for whom values, security, and ideology were always above any political and personal consideration. This is something that was quite common in the past but it's very rare to find such leaders today. Another of his very unique contributions was that in any situation, even in the most complicated situations, he knew exactly how to recognise and how to differentiate between the very important things, and all the rest which did not have to be dealt with at that moment.

He also got into the slightest details of any situation, and sometimes it took him a long time to make decisions because he took the time to investigate, to ask all the questions that needed to be asked, and only when he was convinced would he make a decision.

The most important, most significant contribution to the country was the fact that he was flexible with his perceptions without compromising his values and his ideology. When there was no chance for negotiations, he would focus only on military might. But as soon as there was a window of opportunity to start speaking and negotiating he was open to explore that opportunity without losing the concern for security. So, on the one hand, he had both a tough and solid personality and ideology, but he combined it with flexibility, changing and adapting his views.

**TG:** What was do you think the significance of his assassination for the peace process; though obviously the peace process continued after Rabin, do you think it would have turned out differently had he not been killed and why?

**RH:** Rabin was always a man who believed in actions. In other words, he would move forward only when he was satisfied with the previous treaty being implemented. With the Syrians and the Jordanians – whom he trusted more than the Palestinians at the time – he was willing to negotiate over a full peace treaty. With the Palestinians he agreed to negotiate only on interim agreements. He wouldn't rely on trust; he would rely on implementing the point agreed upon. So my answer would be that it depends on the actions: if he saw that the other side was reverting back to Intifada he would probably stop the process. But if the other side would have implemented and respected the agreement, he would continue it. It was really a matter of going step by step, being careful and remaining a little suspicious.

**TG:** Though Rabin was aware of the risks he chose to pursue a path, when he recognised an opportunity, of 'negotiated coexistence' with the Palestinians. Is there a way back to that path from the situation we're in today and if so how?

**RH:** That was more than 20 years ago, and since then the Middle East has changed dramatically. Don't forget that Rabin was a general, and he was concerned about the strategic threats which Israel had to face. At that time there were organised, well-established armies and military forces around Israel. Today the situation is different, and the threat has changed. Rabin would look at the Middle East today and say, okay, there are still threats along our borders, there are still rockets and missiles directed towards us, but there are other pragmatic forces in the Middle East who can be our potential partners today and not part of the coalition of enemies, like the Saudis and Gulf States.

He was very pragmatic and I believe that today he would point to the Saudi Initiative. He would not accept

all of it, but use it as a framework to refer to. I don't believe that he would rely on or focus on bilateral negotiations today with the Palestinians; he would have preferred to deal with partners whom he trusted, like the Arab states in the region, rather than the current leadership of the Palestinians.

**TG:** Do you have any personal impressions or memories that you have from when you worked with Rabin that you want to share?

**RH:** I can tell you that Rabin was not a man of small talk and he was not a diplomat, so sometimes people would think that he's tough and maybe even not very nice and obviously not very diplomatic. On the other hand talking straight is a great advantage – because what you're going to hear from him is what he really thinks and what he really believes, even if sometimes it was difficult to be around him.

He knew how to be very direct and sometimes it was unpleasant because he expected that from himself and from other people also. But at the same time it was very comforting to know that he would tell you exactly what he thought, exactly what he believed. I just want to add, on a personal note, that I feel lucky that I had an opportunity to work with and to learn from such a great man and we're missing that kind of leader today, unfortunately.

### *Tzipi Livni*

**Lorin Bell-Cross:** Looking back on the life of Yitzhak Rabin, what stands out for you as his outstanding contributions to the State of Israel?

**Tzipi Livni:** His time as Chief of Staff of the IDF during Israel's greatest victory in the Six-Day War and later his decision to divide the land in order to achieve peace with the Palestinians.

Altogether, it's a message that, when needed, we fight for our security but that peace is just as necessary.

I was not in Parliament when he was assassinated, but I decided to join politics a few weeks before. I entered politics because I found myself in the centre of a divided Israeli society while both sides of the political map in Israel couldn't listen to each other. I said 'yes we have historic, biblical and judicial rights over the Land of Israel and yes we need to divide the land in order to maintain the values of the State of Israel – as a Jewish and democratic state – but without postponing the core issues.'

Friends of mine on the Left were waiting for a new Middle East to come; but I said that Oslo – the idea of Oslo – was the right idea. However, I opposed not having a final status agreement, just a memorandum of understanding which postponed the core issues of the conflict.

**LBC:** What was the significance of Rabin's assassination for the peace process? It has continued after his death in the form of Camp David, in Annapolis and John Kerry's sponsored negotiations which you led, but do you think the peace process would have turned out differently had he not been killed?

**TL:** I truly don't know and I believe that nobody knows and no-one can give an answer to this. I have said publically is that this is not important – what is more important is to move forward to achieve peace and to take the right decisions for our future.

The assassination itself caused Israeli society quite a shock. It took 10 years before I could come to Rabin

Square and say that although I didn't vote for him, he was also my prime minister. His assassination was not something that his political camp lost but something that all of us lost.

**LBC:** Does his legacy live on today? There have been several Israeli attempts to create a Palestinian state and offers to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Even though Rabin himself shied away from using the term 'Palestinian State,' the idea of making peace with the Palestinians seems to have been accepted by most centrist parties in Israel.

**TL:** Not only centrist. The vast majority of Israelis support the idea of two states for two peoples – which is not exactly Oslo, but this is what the Oslo agreements are based on. It changed completely the way we do things; it took some years because the right tried to avoid this decision, and as you know they also said that Oslo was criminal. But now it's more than centrist, it's accepted by the centre right as well.

People understand that this is the only solution which guarantees the security of Israel. Only a minority prefer to stick to the Land of Israel even by giving up the values of Israel or the nature of Israel as a Jewish, democratic state, but this minority has quite a large political influence.

It's not about Oslo itself as an agreement, but about understanding that this is where we need to go: that reaching an agreement with the Palestinians serves the interests of Israel and is the only way to avoid Israel becoming a bi-national state or an Arab state.

**LBC:** Although he was aware of the risks, Rabin chose to attempt to pursue a path of negotiated coexistence with the Palestinians. Do you think there's a way back to that path from the situation we find ourselves in today and if so, how would it be done?

**TL:** The choice is between bad options. I don't suggest that just by signing an agreement with the Palestinians we would live happily ever after. It's a tough neighbourhood, not a fairy-tale. But in choosing between bad options I prefer this option. It's risky, but this is a calculated risk and the other option would lead to a situation in which Israel would not be what my parents dreamt for me, and I for my children – a Jewish, democratic state. A bi-national state would be bloody. It's not something that would survive. Therefore, achieving an agreement with the Palestinians does not mean getting married to them, it's more divorcing them. I believe that Rabin understood this and I don't see any other idea out of the box that can serve the interests of Israel better than this.

## *Einat Wilf*

**Alan Johnson:** Looking back on the life of Yitzhak Rabin, what stands out for you as his outstanding contribution to the State of Israel?

**Einat Wilf:** From what I remember of going into the election in 1992, his greatest contribution was the notion that Israel should change its priorities, its focus, investment, and budget, away from the territories in the West Bank and Gaza and into Israel itself – everything from education to bridging the gaps between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

Because the period was also associated with the Oslo negotiations, we've come to associate changing priorities with making peace. This supposedly means that we only focus on Israel within the Green Line if we're making peace, and if we can't make peace then it's absolutely fine to invest in settlements in the West Bank.

That is deeply unfortunate because initially there was not meant to be a package deal, these were two things that happened in parallel. They are now perceived as a package deal to the detriment of Israel's priorities. A lot of people think that Israel should change its priorities to invest within the Green Line and away from the settlements, but because they have lost faith in the immediate possibility of peace, they also feel less passionate and less capable of fighting for changing the priorities.

**AJ:** What do you think was the significance of his assassination for the peace process? The process certainly continued after his death, but do you think it would have turned out differently had he not been killed? Why or why not?

**EW:** I think by now, 20 years later, the evidence is overwhelming that peace would not have been possible.

There is a problem in general today of fetishising leaders – saying that because of this or that leader we could have had peace or we don't have peace – and not looking enough at the deep, root causes of the conflict and the positions of the people.

Where Rabin was and where the Palestinian leadership were, was not close to a place where a peace agreement was possible – certainly a permanent peace agreement that would end the conflict for good, and would lead to an Arab acceptance of Jewish sovereignty in their midst.

Their positions were wildly apart. But because Rabin was assassinated, one of the big problems is that we have tended to fetishise the notion that had he lived we would have peace. His positions were far less forthcoming than that of Barak in 2000 and Olmert in 2008.

Both of them found that the word 'Yes' on behalf of the Palestinians was nowhere to be found, so it is wrong to somehow assume that Rabin would have been able to get the Palestinians to say 'Yes', and to accept the permanence of Jewish sovereignty in a land that they consider to be wholly and completely their own.

**AJ:** Do you see a way back Rabin's path of negotiated coexistence, and what does it look like?

**EW:** When I look at Rabin's path, I want to go back to the notion of separating, the notion of changing Israel's priorities, which was really Rabin's main campaign and the reason he was elected in 1992.

To come back into power, the Israeli left will need to make a strong case for focusing on Israel's priorities within the Green Line, freezing settlement building while at the same time not being naive about the possibility of peace making. It is to our detriment that since Rabin's assassination the two have become intertwined, and they're not.

Leaders of the Israeli left can definitely say something like: 'I will stop settlement building, I will freeze it completely, I will even continue the military occupation if there is no possibility of reaching peace, but I will focus all our budgets, efforts and energy on Israel within the Green Line, everything from reducing gaps between rich and poor, education, Jew and Arabs.'

All that can be done even if the Palestinians are still incapable of saying 'Yes' to the permanence of Jewish sovereignty. That in my view would be a smarter and better return to Rabin's path – focusing on the changing of priorities rather than on the possibility of peacemaking. Changing priorities is entirely up to us. Peacemaking requires two, and as I said, the overwhelming evidence today is that that doesn't exist.

## FOUR

# Rabin in Churchill's War Rooms: remembering a Prime Minister

*Sir Martin Gilbert (2005)*

It was my good fortune to have met Yitzhak Rabin a number of times during the last twenty years of his cruelly truncated life. Our first encounter was during his first premiership, was when I was drawing the maps for the second edition of my Atlas of the Arab-Israel Conflict. It was shortly after the United Nations resolution of November 1975 equating Zionism with racism. I had drawn a map showing all the countries – among them all the Arab countries and all the Communist countries – that voted in favour of this pernicious resolution.

Rabin studied the map carefully for several minutes. I did not like the look on his face. Then he told me, with blunt frankness, that, by itself, this map would not do. It was essential, he said, to show the other side of the coin; to face the map of the anti-Israel nations with a map of those countries that had voted against the resolution. They were the 'real' countries, the great democracies, the countries with liberal and humane values.

Far from complaining about those who voted in favour of the resolution, Rabin urged that we should be proud that Israel was supported by so many decent countries, 35 in all, including Britain. How right he was. I did as he suggested, and it is one of the most important pairs of maps in the atlas.

I learned a lesson that morning that I never forgot; a lesson that Rabin continued to teach to anyone who would listen: that Israel was a country that had no need to hang its head in shame, or to regard itself as a pariah nation.

When, in July 1992, Rabin became Prime Minister for the second time, this point was an important aspect of his first speech in the Knesset. As he told the Israeli legislators: 'No longer are we "a people that dwells alone" and no longer is it true that "the whole world is against us."' 'We must overcome the sense of isolation that has held us in its thrall for almost half a century.'

Rabin was a determined negotiator. He had held secret talks with King Hussein in London in 1985. His peace treaty with Jordan a decade later, negotiated in tandem with Shimon Peres, was a model of its kind. Land was returned to Jordan without an outcry. Rabin and King Hussein found a bond that he would never find with Yasser Arafat. It was a bond of men who had seen the harsh reality of war and were determined that their two countries would not go to war with one another again.

John Major became British Prime Minister at almost the same time that Rabin was returned to power in Israel. Sooner afterwards, Rabin came to London. He and Major were to have talks all morning, but the talks were postponed when Major had to go to Buckingham Place for an emergency discussion about the status of the Princess of Wales in the event of the Queen's death. While Diana was separated but not divorced from Prince Charles: would she or would she not become Queen?

Major had to make an announcement about this in the House of Commons that afternoon and so Rabin was left with no morning talks. I was asked to look after him until Major could return from the Palace. I

took him to the underground Cabinet War Rooms, a short walk from Downing Street.

Rabin was not amused to have been asked to be a tourist. He looked distant and annoyed. In the room used by Churchill and his War Cabinet, I pointed out that on the War Cabinet table was a desk calendar opened at the climactic day of the Battle of Britain. Rabin was motionless and unimpressed. I told him that I wanted to quote the text of one of the telegrams Churchill had sent that day.

Rabin looked totally disinterested. I then began quoting Churchill's telegram. It was to the Mayor of Tel Aviv. Rabin looked vaguely interested. It was a telegram of condolence – Rabin was a little more attentive – sent by Churchill following the death of more than 100 Jews in an Italian air raid on Tel Aviv the previous day. Rabin was suddenly transformed. His face lost ten years. From bored passivity he moved in an instant to total engagement. And then he spoke. For half an hour he held us all entranced.

Rabin had been in Tel Aviv that day. He had just finished his morning swim and was walking home along Bograshov Street. As he walked he heard a roaring sound. The Italian warplanes were over his head, flying inland along the line of the street he was on. Then they dropped their bombs, only a few hundred yards in front of him. He was one of the first to come upon the scene of carnage. As news of the bombing spread, his father had come out to search for him, afraid that he might have been one of the victims.

We continued to walk around the Cabinet War Rooms. When we came to the charts showing the U-boat sinkings in the Battle of the Atlantic, Rabin questioned me intently about the details of the sinkings, and how closely Britain had come to being starved out. He asked me to send him more details of that moment – a black one in Churchill's life – when it looked as if Britain would be brought to its knees. He was profoundly interested in the vulnerability of great nations, seeing parallels with Israel's own vulnerability.

Two years later, in the summer of 1995, I accompanied John Major on his official visit to Jerusalem, Gaza and Amman. As a result of the Oslo agreements, Arafat had returned from Tunis and taken up his chairmanship of the Palestinian Authority. Rabin asked Major to impress upon Arafat that the imminent elections in the Palestinian Authority must be free and fair. In the discussion in Jerusalem, I was impressed by how wary Rabin was of the verbal and even written promises of Chairman Arafat.

Rabin was no man's fool. He pointed out that Arafat had refused to make the pledge to abandon violence an integral part of the Oslo agreements. Instead, he had 'relegated' it to a separate letter between the two men. This, Rabin felt, was an ominous sign, putting, as it did, the promise an end to violence outside the formal framework of the signed agreements.

When I returned to Israel in the autumn of 1995, Rabin asked me to come and see him. He was in the Prime Minister's office, smoking his usual heavy smokes and looking worried. The topic he wished to discuss was Islamic fundamentalism. What concerned him was this: that whenever an Islamist terror act took place, people saw it as a localised, far-distant, nothing-to-do-with them phenomenon. There was no recognition that this was a global phenomenon that affected all nations simultaneously.

Rabin spoke about a number of recent incidents, close in time but scattered geographically. He urged me to map them, and to stress in an explanatory text that these apparently diverse incidents were in fact linked. I was impressed by the strength of his conviction. Today we understand all too well, or ought to, what he was saying a decade ago.

When I said goodbye to Rabin that day, he was looking forward to his next visit to Britain. He told me that one pleasure he always had – after the formal dinners and speeches of any visit was over – was to get together over a glass of beer with the Mahalniks: the men and women in Britain who had gone to Israel

in 1948, as volunteers, to fight in the War of Independence, when the very existence of the new state was in danger.

These men and women, the veteran Mahalniks, were Rabin's special pride. He delighted in their company just as, almost half a century earlier, he had admired their courage.

On the day after Rabin's assassination, I had, by chance, to speak at the annual Mahal reunion in London, an event planned many months earlier. In front of me in the hall were 40 or 50 elderly men and women who under Rabin's command had experienced the heat of battle. They were tough and hardy types. But as I spoke a few words to them about Rabin's life, from every part of the hall came a strange, unfamiliar, muted sound: of men and women weeping.

This article first appeared in *Striving for Peace: The Legacy of Yitzhak Rabin*, 2005, Labour Friends of Israel.

## FIVE

# Rabin's Strategy: understanding security and the limits of power

*Shlomo Avineri (2005)*

When in 1995 Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Accords with the PLO and shook, however reluctantly, Yasser Arafat's hand on the White House lawn, a lot of commentators were surprised by what they viewed as his transformation from a hard-headed general, focused on security, to a peace-maker. The contrast, however, was at least in part artificial, and did less than justice to Rabin's complex and nuanced views on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In January 1976 I was appointed by the government as Director-General of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the recommendation of the Foreign Minister Yigal Allon. Before assuming my position, I had a long talk with Rabin, who became Prime Minister in 1974 after the government of Golda Meir, which included such veterans of Israeli politics as Abba Eban and Moshe Dayan, had to resign in the wake of the Yom Kippur War.

At our meeting, Rabin enquired about my views regarding the possibility of talks with the PLO. Several times I had voiced the opinion that under certain conditions Israel should talk to the PLO, a position which Rabin opposed: I gave the Prime Minister my assurances that so long as I served in the government, I would follow government policies. If I would feel the gap between my personal views and official policy too deep, I would resign – I always had the option of going back to my university position.

I think I satisfied Rabin on this, so I asked if I may ask him a policy question. Assuming the Prime Ministry in the post-Yom Kippur feeling of crisis, Rabin had pointedly avoided making statements about his ultimate goals regarding relations with the Arab countries and the future of the occupied territories. He led a traumatised nation, a deeply wounded Labour Party and a weak and rickety coalition. I said to him that I understood his reluctance to go out on a limb and expose himself to criticism either from the Right or the Left: but since I wanted to be able to follow – and defend – government policy, I needed to hear from him, for my own enlightenment, his views on the future of our relations with the Arab countries and what should be the ultimate fate of the occupied territories.

After admitting his political difficulties, Rabin launched into a lengthy analytical exposé of his strategic and political thinking. The following is based on notes I took at that time.

Ultimately, Rabin said, Israel could not and should not hold on to most of the territories it captured in the Six Days War; specifically, it cannot hold on to the West Bank and Gaza, since ruling three million Palestinians against their will is unacceptable to Israel as a democratic state and will never be countenanced, even by Israel's staunchest friends. Hence he opposed Jewish settlements in the territories, with the exception of the Jordan Valley and parts of the Golan Heights.

Eventually Israel should agree to withdraw from almost all the territories (except Jerusalem). But the major issue is timing: according to him, this cannot and should not be done when the country is still traumatised by its initial failure at the Yom Kippur War and the Arab countries are still intoxicated by their tremendous successes at the beginning of the war, specially the dramatic crossing of the Suez Canal. Any

Israeli withdrawal at this stage would be viewed by the Arabs as proof of their military success and would be interpreted as the beginning of an overall roll-back movement, ultimately aimed at the elimination of Israel.

In order to make it possible for Israel to offer what would be ultimately extremely generous territorial concessions – almost a full withdrawal – a number of conditions would have to be fulfilled, so that Israel's concession would not be interpreted as signs of weakness. For this to happen:

- The Israeli army, badly demoralised and still licking its wounds despite its ultimate successes in the Yom Kippur War, would have to be rehabilitated;
- The Israeli public would have to be convinced that the war has not sapped the national morale;
- Likewise, the Arab countries have to be convinced that they would not be able to use outside diplomatic pressure on Israel;
- The US strategic commitment to Israel has to be deepened and turned into long-term arrangements: US aid to Israel, which jumped to more than \$2 billion after the Yom Kippur War, has to become the benchmark for US annual military aid to Israel. Only such a secure anchoring would signal to all – including the Soviet Union – that the ultimate arrangements in the area are not an outcome of Israeli weakness.

Only if these conditions would be fulfilled – and Rabin estimated a period of three-four years – could Israel seriously consider negotiations about the final status of the territories. In the meantime, a series of interim agreements should be undertaken, to show that there is momentum.

Regarding the Palestinians, Rabin said he would prefer an agreement with Jordan (which after all ruled the West Bank prior to 1967). Negotiating with the PLO, he argued, would mean creating a Soviet client-state at our door steps, and given Soviet attitudes to Israel, this 'would be madness.'

I was impressed then – as I am today – by the sophistication and complexity of this analysis: I also understood why, given its layered nature, it could not be explicitly stated. Yet – to use common metaphors – it combined a strategic 'dovish' long-term strategy with a tactical 'hawkish' short-term public stance. By trying to reach further interim agreements with Egypt, and by maintaining close though clandestine contact with King Hussein, Rabin followed this strategy: his main concern, however, was to cement the strategic relationship with the USA, in which he succeeded both in terms of the funding as well as in terms of the new, modern equipment which enabled Israel to re-establish both the reality, and the perception, of its deterrent power and relative strength.

The Rabin Prime Ministry came to an unhappy end in 1977 due to reasons which had little to do with his policies. Yet when looking at his consent, during his second Prime Ministry in 1993, to go ahead with the Oslo agreements, the basic analysis he gave me in 1976 has been vindicated:

- Israel was able to re-establish its military standing and its deterrence;
- Strategic relations with the US were established on the basis – both financial and substantive – envisaged by Rabin;
- The disappearance of the Soviet Union (unforeseen by Rabin, as by everyone else) also meant that the Arab countries lost their strategic ally;

- With the demise of Soviet power, the PLO was no longer a Soviet client, and the emergence of a PLO-headed state in the West Bank and Gaza would now mean the emergence of a weak Arab state, not a Soviet foothold in the area;
- All these developments also had their impact on the PLO, which slowly (albeit reluctantly and not always honestly) moved from its military stance aimed at eliminating Israel to a less militant posture.

Many things changed between my long talk with Rabin in 1976 and the Oslo Accords in 1993. Rabin did not turn from a hawk into a dove: the circumstances he envisaged in 1976 fell into place, though it took longer than he imagined initially.

On a more theoretical level, Rabin expressed these views at a speech he delivered in October 1986 at a conference at Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva on the 1956 Suez-Sinai War. At that time he was Minister of Defence in the Shamir-Peres National Unity Government. Given the nature of the government and his subservient position in it (he was No. 3) – he chose to keep a low profile on issues of ultimate solution to the conflict.

Yet the subject he chose for his lecture was significant: while many of the participants at the conference, who included British and French politicians, dwelt – some with visible nostalgia – on what they viewed as the lost opportunities of 1956, Rabin chose to speak on ‘The Limits of Power’ – in any case, not the usual subject matter for ministers of defence [1].

The crux of Rabin’s lecture was his contention that Clausewitz’s dictum about war being merely the continuation of diplomacy by other means cannot be sustained under contemporary conditions – for a variety of general reasons, and specifically in the Arab-Israeli context.

According to Rabin, democracies – unless totally mobilised in a war against totalitarian dictatorships as in World War II – cannot follow the Clausewitzian dictum: in order to win a war in a democratic context, one has to be able to mobilise public opinion and manpower in ways which are different from the situation in Clausewitz’s own time. Without being a neo-Kantian or a Wilsonian (in any case, he would not feel at home addressing their thoughts), Rabin realised the limits of power imposed by democratic values and institutions. ‘Wars of Choice’ cannot be easily waged by democracies: this was the cause of the Franco-British debacle at Suez, but he obviously also had the US in Vietnam in mind, though he did not say so. He explicitly dwelt on the 1982 ‘War of Choice’ Israel waged in Lebanon and went into some detail explaining why Israel’s strategy (under Begin and Sharon, though he didn’t name names) was doomed to fail: forcing Lebanon to sign a peace treaty with Israel under conditions of occupation was a pipe dream: ‘Through military means ... the attempt to bring about a war that will end all wars is a dangerous course of action and an illusion.’

Rabin went on to argue that what the Allies were able to impose on Germany, Japan and Italy after 1945 cannot be achieved by Israel vis-à-vis the Arab countries. While he insisted that Israel needed a projection of its military power to deter Arab attempts to attack or try to destroy it, he concluded:

‘As I reflect on the long-term implications of this perception of the limits to our military power in the face of continuing threat from war and acts of terrorism, I have come to the conclusion that force of arms alone cannot bring about the desired termination of the Arab-Israeli conflict.’ What Israel needs according to Rabin is ‘commitment, patience and endurance’, as there is no ‘Dekhikat ha-Ketz’ [‘Bringing about the end of days’] nor does there exist a short-cut through ‘zbenig ve-gamarnu’ [Hebrew slang for ‘one shot, and it’s over’].

I have chosen to dwell of these aspects of Rabin's thinking because more than the usual encomiums, they seem to me to bring out the complexity of a man who always said he wanted to be a water engineer, but found itself involved in warfare – and peacemaking. Both were the twin sides of the same coin.

[1] The following is based on the text of Rabin's lecture as published in *The Suez-Sinai Crisis 1956: Retrospective and Reappraisal*, edited by S.I. Troen and M. Shemesh, London, 1990, pp. 238-242.

This article first appeared in *Striving for Peace: The Legacy of Yitzhak Rabin*, 2005, Labour Friends of Israel.

## SIX

### Rabin: A photo essay



Greeting young soldiers, 1964. *Israel Defense Forces*



With King Hussein of Jordan, 1994. *Sa'ar Ya'acov/Government Press Office*



Lt. Gen Rabin is visited by his children at work. *IDF blog*



At play, 1992. *Sa'ar Ya'acov/Government Press Office*



PM Yitzhak Rabin and British PM John Major during a reception ceremony in Jerusalem's Rose Garden, 12th March 1995. *Sa'ar Ya'acov/National Photo Collection*



With President Clinton and Yasser Arafat at the signing of the Oslo Accords 13th September 1993. *Israel Defense Forces*



Sharing a joke with President Clinton. *Israel Defense Forces*



Yitzhak Rabin with Yigal Allon during the War of Independence (1949). *Israel Defense Forces archive*



Yitzhak Rabin as young man shortly before joining the Palmach. *Israel Defense Forces archive*



Yitzhak Rabin laughs with Micha Goldman at a Labour party meeting in Tel Aviv, 16th September, 1989. *Moshe Shai/FLASH90*



IDF Chief of Staff in 1963. *Israel Defense Forces archive*

## SEVEN

# Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech

*Yitzhak Rabin (1994)*

*Yitzhak Rabin's speech in Oslo, Norway, on 10th December 1994 after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.*

Your Majesty the King,  
Your Royal Highness,  
Esteemed Members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee,  
Honourable Prime Minister, Madame Gro Harlem Brundtland,  
Ministers,  
Members of the Parliament and Ambassadors,  
Fellow Laureates,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Friends,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At an age when most youngsters are struggling to unravel the secrets of mathematics and the mysteries of the Bible; at an age when first love blooms; at the tender age of 16, I was handed a rifle so that I could defend myself – and also, unfortunately, so that I could kill in an hour of danger.

That was not my dream. I wanted to be a water engineer. I studied in an agricultural school and I thought that being a water engineer was an important profession in the parched Middle East. I still think so today. However, I was compelled to resort to the gun.

I served in the military for decades. Under my command, young men and women who wanted to live, wanted to love, went to their deaths instead. Under my command, they killed the enemy's men who had been sent out to kill us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my current position, I have ample opportunity to fly over the State of Israel, and lately over other parts of the Middle East as well. The view from the plane is breathtaking: deep-blue lakes, dark-green fields, dun-coloured deserts, stone-gray mountains, and the entire countryside peppered with whitewashed, red-roofed houses.

And cemeteries. Graves as far as the eye can see.

Hundreds of cemeteries in our part of the Middle East – in our home in Israel – but also in Egypt, in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. From the plane's window, from thousands of feet above them, the countless tombstones are silent. But the sound of their outcry has carried from the Middle East throughout the world for decades.

Standing here today, I wish to salute loved ones - and foes. I wish to salute all the fallen of all the countries in all the wars; the members of their families who bear the enduring burden of bereavement; the disabled

whose scars will never heal. Tonight I wish to pay tribute to each and every one of them, for this important prize is theirs, and theirs alone.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was a young man who has now grown fully in years. And of all the memories I have stored up in my 72 years, what I shall remember most, to my last day, are the silences.

The heavy silence of the moment after, and the terrifying silence of the moment before.

As a military man, as a commander, I issued orders for dozens, probably hundreds of military operations. And together with the joy of victory and grief of bereavement, I shall always remember the moment just after making the decision to mount an action: the hush as senior officers or cabinet ministers slowly rise from their seats; the sight of their receding backs; the sound of the closing door; and then the silence in which I remain alone.

That is the moment you grasp that as a result of the decision just made, people will be going to their deaths. People from my nation, people from other nations. And they still don't know it.

At that hour, they are still laughing and weeping; still weaving plans and dreaming about love; still musing about planting a garden or building a house - and they have no idea these are their last hours on earth. Which of them is fated to die? Whose picture will appear in a black border in tomorrow's newspaper? Whose mother will soon be in mourning? Whose world will crumble under the weight of the loss?

As a former military man, I will also forever remember the silence of the moment before: the hush when the hands of the clock seem to be spinning forward, when time is running out and in another hour, another minute, the inferno will erupt.

In that moment of great tension just before the finger pulls the trigger, just before the fuse begins to burn; in the terrible quiet of that moment, there's still time to wonder, alone: Is it really imperative to act? Is there no other choice? No other way?

And then the order is given, and the inferno begins.

'God takes pity on kindergarteners', wrote the poet Yehudah Amichai, who is here with us tonight,

'God takes pity on kindergarteners,  
Less so on schoolchildren,  
And will no longer pity their elders,  
Leaving them to their own.  
And sometimes they will have to crawl on all fours  
Through the burning sand  
To reach the casualty station  
Bleeding.'

For decades God has not taken pity on the kindergarteners in the Middle East, or the schoolchildren, or their elders. There has been no pity in the Middle East for generations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was a young man who has now grown fully in years. And of all the memories I have stored up in my 72 years, I now recall the hopes.

Our peoples have chosen us to give them life. Terrible as it is to say, their lives are in our hands. Tonight, their eyes are upon us and their hearts are asking: how is the authority vested in these men and women being used? What will they decide? What kind of morning will we rise to tomorrow? A day of peace? Of war? Of laughter or of tears?

A child is born into an utterly undemocratic world. He cannot choose his father and mother. He cannot pick his sex or colour, his religion, nationality, or homeland. Whether he is born in a manor or a manger, whether he lives under a despotic or democratic regime, it is not his choice. From the moment he comes, close-fisted, into the world, his fate lies in the hands of his nation's leaders. It is they who will decide whether he lives in comfort or despair, in security or in fear. His fate is given to us to resolve - to the Presidents and Prime Ministers of countries, democratic or otherwise.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Just as no two fingerprints are identical, so no two people are alike, and every country has its own laws and culture, traditions and leaders. But there is one universal message which can embrace the entire world, one precept which can be common to different regimes, to races which bear no resemblance, to cultures alien to each other.

It is a message which the Jewish people has borne for thousands of years, a message found in the *Book of Books*, which my people has bequeathed to all civilized men: 'v'nishmartem me'od inafshoteichem', in the words in *Deuteronomy*; 'Therefore take good heed to yourselves' - or, in contemporary terms, the message of the sanctity of life.

The leaders of nations must provide their peoples with the conditions – the 'infrastructure', if you will – which enables them to enjoy life: freedom of speech and of movement; food and shelter; and most important of all: life itself. A man cannot enjoy his rights if he is not among the living. And so every country must protect and preserve the key element in its national ethos: the lives of its citizens.

To defend those lives, we call upon our citizens to enlist in the army. And to defend the lives of our citizens serving in the army, we invest huge sums in planes, and tanks, in armoured plating and concrete fortifications. Yet despite it all, we fail to protect the lives of our citizens and soldiers. Military cemeteries in every corner of the world are silent testimony to the failure of national leaders to sanctify human life.

There is only one radical means of sanctifying human lives. Not armoured plating, or tanks, or planes, or concrete fortifications.

The one radical solution is peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The profession of soldiering embraces a certain paradox. We take the best and bravest of our young men into the army. We supply them with equipment which costs a virtual fortune. We rigorously train them for the day when they must do their duty – and we expect them to do it well. Yet we fervently pray that that day will never come – that the planes will never take flight, the tanks will never move forward, the soldiers will never mount the attacks for which they have been trained so well.

We pray it will never happen because of the sanctity of life.

History as a whole, and modern history in particular, has known harrowing times when national leaders turned their citizens into cannon fodder in the name of wicked doctrines: vicious Fascism and fiendish Nazism. Pictures of children marching to the slaughter, photos of terrified women at the gates of crematoria must loom before the eyes of every leader in our generation, and the generations to come. They must serve as a warning to all who wield power.

Almost all the regimes which did not place man and the sanctity of life at the heart of their world view, all those regimes have collapsed and are no more. You can see it for yourselves in our own day.

Yet this is not the whole picture. To preserve the sanctity of life, we must sometimes risk it. Sometimes there is no other way to defend our citizens than to fight for their lives, for their safety and sovereignty. This is the creed of every democratic state.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the State of Israel, from which I come today; in the Israel Defense Forces, which I have had the privilege to command, we have always viewed the sanctity of life as a supreme value. We have gone to war only when a fearful sword was poised to cut us down.

The history of the State of Israel, the annals of the Israel Defense Forces are filled with thousands of stories of soldiers who sacrificed themselves – who died while trying to save wounded comrades; who gave their lives to avoid causing harm to innocent people on the enemy's side.

In the coming days, a special commission of the Israel Defense Forces will finish drafting a Code of Conduct for our soldiers. The formulation regarding human life will read as follows, and I quote:

'In recognition of its supreme importance, the soldier will preserve human life in every way possible and endanger himself, or others, only to the extent deemed necessary to fulfil this mission.

The sanctity of life, in the view of the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, will find expression in all their actions; in considered and precise planning; in intelligent and safety-minded training and in judicious implementation, in accordance with their mission; in taking the professionally proper degree of risk and degree of caution; and in the constant effort to limit casualties to the scope required to achieve the objective.' End quote.

For many years ahead – even if wars come to an end, after peace comes to our land – these words will remain a pillar of fire which goes before our camp, a guiding light for our people. And we take pride in that.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are in the midst of building the peace. The architects and engineers of this enterprise are engaged in their work even as we gather here tonight, building the peace layer by layer, brick by brick, beam by beam. The job is difficult, complex, trying. Mistakes could topple the whole structure and bring disaster down upon us.

And so we are determined to do the job well – despite the toll of murderous terrorism, despite fanatic and scheming enemies.

We will pursue the course of peace with determination and fortitude.

We will not let up.

We will not give in.

Peace will triumph over all our enemies, because the alternative is grim for us all.

And we will prevail.

We will prevail because we regard the building of peace as a great blessing for us, and for our children after us. We regard it as a blessing for our neighbours on all sides, and for our partners in this enterprise - the United States, Russia, Norway, and all mankind.

We wake up every morning, now, as different people. Suddenly, peace. We see the hope in our children's eyes. We see the light in our soldier's faces, in the streets, in the buses, in the fields.

We must not let them down.

We will not let them down.

I do not stand here alone, today, on this small rostrum in Oslo. I am the emissary of generations of Israelis, of the shepherds of Israel, just as King David was a shepherd, of the herdsmen and dressers of sycamore trees, as the Prophet Amos was; of the rebels against the establishment, like the Prophet Jeremiah, and of men who go down to the sea, like the Prophet Jonah.

I am the emissary of the poets and of those who dreamed of an end to war, like the Prophet Isaiah.

I am also the emissary of sons of the Jewish people like Albert Einstein and Baruch Spinoza; like Maimonides, Sigmund Freud, and Franz Kafka.

And I am the emissary of the millions who perished in the Holocaust, among whom were surely many Einsteins and Freuds who were lost to us, and to humanity, in the flames of the crematoria.

I am here as the emissary of Jerusalem, at whose gates I fought in days of siege; Jerusalem which has always been, and is today, the eternal capital of the State of Israel and the heart of the Jewish people, who pray toward it three times a day.

And I am also the emissary of the children who drew their visions of peace; and of the immigrants from Saint Petersburg and Addis Ababa.

I stand here mainly for the generations to come, so that we may all be deemed worthy of the medallion which you have bestowed on me today.

I stand here as the emissary of our neighbours who were our enemies. I stand here as the emissary of the soaring hopes of a people which has endured the worst that history has to offer and nevertheless made its mark – not just on the chronicles of the Jewish people but on all mankind.

With me here are five million citizens of Israel – Jews and Arabs, Druze and Circassians – five million hearts beating for peace - and five million pairs of eyes which look to us with such great expectations for peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to thank, first and foremost, those citizens of the State of Israel, of all generations and political persuasions, whose sacrifices and relentless struggle for peace bring us steadier closer to our goal.

I wish to thank our partners - the Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians, and the Chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Mr. Yasser Arafat, with whom we share this Nobel Prize – who have chosen the path of peace and are writing a new page in the annals of the Middle East.

I wish to thank the members of the Israeli government and above all my colleague Mr. Shimon Peres, whose energy and devotion to the cause of peace are an example to us all.

I wish to thank my family for their support.

And, of course, I wish to thank the members of the Nobel Committee and the courageous Norwegian people for bestowing this illustrious honour on my colleagues and myself.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to close by sharing with you a traditional Jewish blessing which has been recited by my people, in good times and in bad, from time immemorial, as a token of their deepest longing:

‘The Lord will give strength to his people; the Lord will bless his people – all of us – with peace.’

The text of this speech was reproduced from the Yitzhak Rabin Center website:

<http://www.rabincenter.org.il/>

## About the Contributors

**Shlomo Avineri** is Professor of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a former Director-General of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He is the author of many books, among them *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (Basic Books, 1981).

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**Fathom** is great! It's accessible and provides expert analysis on strategic, cultural and economic issues relating to Israel. Amidst a lot of sloganeering, **Fathom** provides nuanced discussion. As such, it fills a real gap.

**Amnon Rubinstein** was a member of the Knesset for Meretz between 1977 and 2002 and he served in several ministerial positions.

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