

A Tribute to Shimon Peres, 1923-2016

Once, a shepherd turned warrior and gifted poet became the hero of the Jewish people. With courage and vision he made Jerusalem the eternal capital of the Jewish people, while securing precious water resources for his nation. He secured borders against hostile armies, but thrived in the quiet of his Jerusalem home with song and prayer.

This hero was King David. David's flaws and mistakes were meticulously documented in the Biblical text, and sometimes make us cringe. But the Biblical text also demonstrated his many gifts, and honestly demonstrated his yearning to please God.

David remained our hero for three millenia. We sing "David Melech Yisrael" with yearning to return to David's glory days. We still sing David's Psalms in our daily and holiday prayers. Jewish tradition imagined that the future *Anointed One/Mashiach* - God's Messiah -- would be a descendant of David, an heir to his legacy.

David dreamt big dreams, inspiring countless generations of Jews to keep dreaming.

I thought a lot about King David this past week when we sadly bade farewell to another great leader of our people, a dreamer who changed the world in our times. Near the end of his 93 long and tremendously fruitful years, Peres said, "The only thing I regret is not dreaming big enough."

On becoming the 9th President of Israel, in his inauguration address in 2007 Peres evoked King David, "My dream was not to be a president. My dream was to be a shepherd or a poet of the stars," Shimon Peres said.

Peres's was a key figure in Israeli leadership for more than 50 years, serving as Prime Minister twice, and then President. In 1994 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize along with his former rival-turned-"brother," Yitzhak Rabin, of blessed memory, for the Oslo accords, paving the way for mapping out two states for two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians ultimately living side-by-side in peace.

Three weeks ago, Shimon Peres sat for what he intended to be a Rosh Hashanah-timed discussion about the state of the world. It was also his final one.¹ David Samuels wrote:

"Shimon Peres was one of the great conjurers of modern politics, able to make life-altering realities appear seemingly out of thin air. Like many other successful artists, ...his world-spanning imaginative gifts were matched by his technical mastery of the large systems of meaning he worked within, and by his gift for reading other people correctly and persuading them to give him what he wanted. ..."

"A descendent of Rav Chaim of Volozhin, the greatest student of the Vilna Gaon, Peres immigrated at the age of 11 from what was then Poland to Palestine in 1934." A little more than a decade later, as a young *Haganah* soldier, he became chief aide to David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founder."

"The list of Peres' accomplishments is long, and any half-dozen of them would be enough to comfortably fill the biography of a highly accomplished person who played a significant role on the

¹ **Tablet: ONE LAST INTERVIEW David Samuels**

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world-historical stage. He built many of the systems and relationships on which Israel's powerful defense establishment was founded; he got the weapons from France that broke the embargo that was intended to strangle the Jewish state in its cradle; he was the father of the Israeli nuclear reactor at Dimona, and what, according to Colin Powell's recent emails, are over 200 Israeli nuclear bombs. He was a prime mover of the Oslo Peace Accords, which promised a peace that large numbers of Israelis and Palestinians both yearn for and reject. He was the grandfather, spiritually and practically, of the Israeli tech industry, whose capacity for innovation continues to startle the world."

"Peres' detractors often got him wrong," as did many of his biggest fans, "because he dwelt in a relativistic universe, in which he functioned as an artist whose medium was political power. He was simultaneously the walking representative of Israel's hopes for peace, and the bone-deep embodiment of the country's defense establishment."

"He cared deeply about the Jewish people and about the future of humanity. He charmed people with his warm, grandfatherly manner, especially in his old age, yet he was seemingly immune to most normal human emotion, including in situations in which other experienced politicians would get carried away by anger or grief."

"Peres loved the idea of the future, and scoffed at the past, which he would then recall in loving and highly specific detail. He understood human beings and manipulated affairs of state without an ounce of evident sentimentality. At the same time, he was a dreamer who devoutly believed that his dreams would come true."

Peres told Samuels, "I am not sure that the Six Day War was a great victory. I am sure that we committed a mistake by not converting the victory into peace. As a result, we had the Yom Kippur War. So it's not if you enter the war, but how do you conclude the war. And even if you are a winner in the beginning, you may become a little bit drunk."

You cannot take history in pieces. It's consequential. The foundation of the Jewish existence is morality. More than power. Not morality as a talking point, but morality in fact. And I think what is moral is reasonable. I think the wisest thing in life is to be an honest man. And by the way, it doesn't cost money, you know?"

When he served as Israel's defense minister Peres was charged with the difficult task of rebuilding the Israeli army after the devastation of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Peres oversaw the agreements with Egypt and Syria after the Yom Kippur War.

He was behind the 1976 dramatic Entebbe mission to rescue hijacked Israeli passengers on an Air France flight. He achieved the building of the "Good Fence" with Lebanon, where he laid the foundations for cooperation with the Christian leadership in Lebanon.

Peres also helped some of the early West Bank settlers while he was defense minister. At that time, he saw them as Zionists and pioneers. His positions on the West Bank occupation and the settlements changed dramatically over the years with the shifting reality and new-found political insights.

In 1992, Peres became foreign minister. In that role, Peres became a central architect and leader of the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians in 1993. The signing of the accords dramatically shifted Israel's policies toward the PLO. Israel now recognized the PLO as the representative body of the Palestinian people and opened negotiations for a framework of a Middle East peace process. Yassir Arafat, long a hated enemy of Israel and the Jewish people, was recognized as the Palestinian people's

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representative. Peres worked on advancing relations between Israel and Jordan, facilitating a peace accord with Jordan's King Hussein.

During peace negotiations in Taba in August 1995, as Peres sat with Yasser Arafat, long past midnight, after an exceptionally heated exchange between the two, he said, "Mr. Chairman, as much as I am convinced you are totally wrong, I would still rather sit here negotiating with you for five more days and nights than have Israelis and Palestinians shoot bullets for five minutes."

Peres's never wearied of advocating for the societal, civilian and national benefits of peace and the necessity of attracting youth to it. Peres saw the nature of peace and security as intertwined. He was intent on securing Israel as a Jewish democracy as he strived for the two-states-for-two-peoples solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Everything seemed possible then -- and Peres never gave up on his work and hope for peace -- until the end of his life.

Peres served as president of Israel from 2007 until July 2014. During that time I had the privilege to meet him personally a number of times, and I was tremendously inspired by his visionary optimism and his mellifluous, poetic reflections as he spoke about peace and the future.

He was known for his many keen and insightful observations about life, war and peace and the nature of Israel. Here are a few:

- "The Jews' greatest contribution to history is dissatisfaction! We're a nation born to be discontented. Whatever exists we believe can be changed for the better."
- "When you have two alternatives, the first thing you have to do is to look for the third that you didn't think about, that doesn't exist."
- "My heart goes out to the brave citizens of Syria, who each day risk and even sacrifice their lives to achieve freedom from a murderous regime. We in Israel welcome the historic struggle to forge democratic, peace-loving governments in our region."
- "If you don't give equal rights to women, you can't progress."
- "Israel doesn't intend to introduce nuclear weapons, but if people are afraid that we have them, why not? It's a deterrent."
- "Sometimes people ask me, 'What is the greatest achievement you have reached in your lifetime or that you will reach in the future?' So I reply that there was a great painter named Mordecai Ardon, who was asked which picture was the most beautiful he had ever painted. Ardon replied, 'The picture I will paint tomorrow.' That is also my answer."
- "At my age, after looking back, if I feel that I have to make a choice between being experienced and cynical or being curious and innocent, I prefer the second. It is much more appealing."

Peres was a big supporter of innovation. He made a sensational video with Mark Zuckerberg when he opened his Facebook account. He opened his Snapchat account at the age of 93, becoming an internationally viral sensation with two videos -- with great humor and creativity. He used social media right up until the end of his life to reach young people and to teach optimism. He remained young and energetic, and was willing to laugh at himself. The last Tweet on Peres' Twitter timeline -- announcing the creation of his Snapchat account last month -- reflected his forward-thinking spirit. He announced, "I hope to find this page to be a place where peace dreamers and believers speak up and share their stories and experiences with me. Facebook empowers us. So let's dare to believe, start to change our world and create a better tomorrow."

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If you haven't seen his charming and humorous 2015 video, "Shimon Peres Goes Job Hunting," you *must* -- go to YouTube. Peres concluded it saying, "You are as great as the cause that you serve, and as young as your dreams."

"Peres secured Israel's deterrent capability and its defensive strength, worked to establish true peace within Israel as well as between Israel and her neighbors, and stood at the forefront of the country's transformation into a technological superpower – the Startup Nation."

David Harris, CEO of the AJC wrote, "Peres had extraordinary energy, boundless optimism, and future-oriented vision, not only about the possibilities of peace and coexistence in the region, but also about the exciting pathways of new technologies for the benefit of humankind—from nano-science to mapping the brain."

At the groundbreaking ceremony in July for the new "Israeli Innovation Center," part of the *Peres Center for Peace*, Peres described his vision:

"We will obviously salute the achievements of the past, but we will mainly be focused on breakthroughs for a new tomorrow. We will prove that innovation has no boundaries and no barriers and that it allows for dialogue between nations and populations."

President Obama, in his emotional tribute upon Peres' passing last week wrote, "There are few people who we share this world with who change the course of human history, not just through their role in human events, but because they expand our moral imagination and force us to expect more of ourselves. My friend Shimon was one of those people." President Obama recalled Peres saying, "I learned that public service is a privilege that must be based on moral foundations." He saluted Peres as a "*statesman whose commitment to Israel's security and pursuit of peace was rooted in his own unshakeable moral foundation and unflagging optimism.*" When he asked Peres for advice, Peres replied "that while people often say that the future belongs to the young, it's the present that really belongs to the young. 'Leave the future to me,' he said, 'I have time.'"

President Obama concluded, "Shimon Peres was guided by a vision of human dignity in pursuit of our ideals of justice and equality...A light has gone out, but the hope he gave us will burn forever. Shimon Peres was a soldier for Israel, for the Jewish people, for justice, for peace, and for the belief that we can be true to our best selves - to the very end of our time on Earth, and in the legacy that we leave to others. For the gift of his friendship and the example of his leadership, *todah rabah*², Shimon."

Shimon Peres taught us many lessons about the human capacity to endure, learn, change, and remain visionary. Shimon Peres was a man of vision and of action. He devoted his life to the service of his country and the world, and he loved the people of Israel with all his heart. We have lost our father, teacher, leader, and friend. May his memory be a blessing.

In a time when visionary leadership is sorely lacking, we would do well to carry Shimon Peres' teaching and inspiration with us in our hearts and minds. When we need to be reminded of our own capacity for *teshuvah*, creativity and optimism, may Shimon Peres' example pick us up and lead us forward.

{The quotes contained here came from a variety of media sources, including *Ha'aretz*, *The New York Times*, *Tablet* magazine, *The Forward*, the *JTA* and *The Times of Israel*.}

² *todah rabah* means thank you very much