

# Songs of Peace

Emily Gian

It was one of those moments in history. Anyone of a certain age with any interest in Israel remembers where they were when they heard the news that Yitzhak Rabin had been assassinated.

I was only 12, and do not remember much about the morning the news filtered through here in Australia. But collective memory is powerful and, over the years, I have assembled snippets of memory from this tumultuous time in Jewish history.

I remember the funeral, televised across the globe, and to the sense of affinity I felt with Rabin's freckle-faced granddaughter, Noa, and her eloquent, heartfelt eulogy to the slain prime minister. She was not that much older than me, but she spoke bravely and courageously about her grandfather, her pillar of fire.

I remember feeling the sense of history in hearing King Hussein of Jordan, from "the opposite side of the historic divide" speaking so warmly of his "brother" in peace. And, famously, the words of US President Bill Clinton, ending with those two wonderful words of brotherhood, "shalom, chaver".

It's a question that I still can't answer. Am I really recalling his funeral or is it that, after viewing so many replays over the passage of the years, I have convinced myself that I really watched it in real time? The question fades when I reflect on the importance of the moment.

Thanks to the global media networks, the entire world was able to pay respect to a heroic figure, who transformed from a man of war to a man who was passionate and sincere in his support of peace. Rabin had shown this many times since his September 1993 handshake with Yasser Arafat on the lawns of the White House. He concluded his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech by saying,

“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.”

That message was repeated in the speech he gave at the peace rally that preceded the assassination in the Tel Aviv square that now bears his name. The vision from that night remains: not only the speech-making, but also the peace songs, the final, joyous moments of solidarity on that fateful night, the announcement on the Israeli news from correspondent Aharon Barnea that Rabin had not survived the attack but had passed away in hospital, followed by the outpouring of the grief, chaos and confusion of the time.

The clearest memories I carry in my mind are those of the music that became synonymous with Rabin. Many of those songs swirl in the memory but there are two that stand out: Shir Leshalom—Song of Peace—and Livkot Lecha—To Cry for You.

Shir Leshalom was controversial when first written in 1969, only two years after the Six Day War and with the Yom Kippur War still four years away. The song initially received a frosty reception from Israel’s senior military figures. However, on the night of 4 November 1995, Rabin, his fellow Nobel Peace Laureate Shimon Peres and Israeli folk singer Miri Aloni concluded the rally by singing Shir Leshalom, along with the tens of thousands in attendance. In that one place were gathered the nation’s generations—old, middle-aged, teenagers and the very young—singing a hymn for peace.

But sadly, not every person there agreed with his message. As he was leaving the rally, Rabin was murdered. The lyrics to Shir Leshalom were later found on a bloodstained sheet of paper in his shirt pocket. Surely, a metaphor for the entire peace process?

Twenty-five years have passed and we are further away from peace than ever before but, whenever I hear the song, I feel my heart

swelling, as if the optimism of the early '90s, when peace seemed possible, returns.

*Lift your eyes with hope  
Not through the rifles' sights  
Sing a song for love  
And not for wars  
Don't say the day will come  
Bring on that day  
Because it is not a dream  
And in all the city squares  
Cheer only for peace!*

Aviv Geffen is an extremely popular figure among Israeli youth for his post-punk, experimental rock music. He wrote Livkot Lecha in memory of a friend who died in a car accident a few years earlier, and sang it onstage during the peace rally. Ever since, the words of the song have taken on a whole new meaning as a prophesy of the tragic assassination that took place later that night.

*I am going to cry for you, be strong up there  
My longings are like doors opened at night.*

*Forever, my brother, I will always remember you  
And at the end we will meet, you know,  
I have other friends but they too fade away  
Against your unbelievable light.*

Livkot Lecha became an anthem for Rabin. Geffen sang it in the very same place a week after the assassination and it came to symbolise the 'Candle Youth', who mourned Rabin by lighting memorial candles. It does not matter where I am or what I am doing, whenever I hear it, the song stirs within me a real sense of nostalgia—almost a longing—for this sad period when the nation lost its peacemaker and was, for a short time, united in grief.

The songs of the era speak to the impact that Rabin had on my life and the lives of my generation. They demonstrated Rabin's example of achieving peace between people who were once enemies. During my student days at the University of Melbourne in the early 2000s, despite the second intifada, I still hoped that peace with the Palestinians was attainable. I wrote hope-filled essays in Jewish studies and history about Rabin and the Oslo peace accords.

I admired the courage it took for the former soldier to extend his hand in peace to the Palestinians, his bravery in understanding that the only way to make peace with Israel's neighbours was to find a way to meet them in a spirit of mutual recognition and compromise.

When I first began working for Zionism Victoria (then the State Zionist Council of Victoria), one of my earliest projects was to carry out background research for a briefing paper on the 2003 Sydney Peace Prize, which was about to be awarded to Hanan Ashrawi. There were many who advocated that she should not be awarded the prize. There was certainly a body of evidence, including her own words, to suggest that Ashrawi was not a woman of peace. But my real concern was that, if this prize really addressed the subject of enemies making peace, then it was disingenuous that only one side be honoured. Surely, if it was to be presented to Ashrawi, then it should also have been presented to a worthy Israeli recipient, like Amos Oz?

However, those responsible for the Sydney Peace Prize were not interested. They preferred a one-sided approach, which ultimately caused fractures in the peace discussion and ran in diametric opposition to the legacy of Rabin. Peace was about compromise and, above everything, it was about partnership. That is why Rabin, Peres and Arafat all were awarded Nobel Peace Prizes. We can argue at length about Arafat and his suitability for the award, but the agreement would not have been possible without his presence.

This is precisely why American Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's September 2020 decision to self-isolate from peace, by withdrawing from an Americans for Peace Now event to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Rabin's assassination, is so regrettable. The message this one-sided decision leaves is one of Ocasio-Cortez's betrayal of Israelis and Palestinians who want peace. It begs the question why someone with her lack of credentials on the subject was invited to be on the podium of a rally for peace in the first place.

Peace can only be achieved through diplomacy and mutual recognition by people who want to achieve it. Boycotts and public statements against Israel will not bring the two sides together. Instead, they will drive the parties further apart. This is, perhaps, why we see Arab states beginning to leave the Palestinians behind when they reach out to Israel to create new relationships for the future.

I might not remember with clarity the night of Rabin's assassination, but I am forever grateful to have been able to learn about his life and his legacy. That will stay with me forever.

*Lift your eyes with hope  
Not through the rifles' sights  
Sing a song for love  
And not for wars.*