

# A foundation

Jack Chrapot

Mount Herzl sits on the west side of Jerusalem, next to the Jerusalem Forest. It holds the graves of Israeli prime ministers and presidents, as well as soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the country. On a winter's morning, barely one year after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, our overcoats were buttoned up against a wind blowing cold and hard against our faces. As we stood paying homage at his grave, we listened to the words of our guide as she spoke, tears in her eyes, of his life, his achievements, his death and his legacy.

Up until that moment, our tour of the country had produced its moments of happy and sad but, mostly, our other guides had been casual and matter of fact: "this is a Roman column"; "this is the site of a Biblical event"; "a famous battle was fought here". We were taken aback, therefore, when this young woman stood weeping at the grave of her fallen hero—the student of agriculture, a fighter in the War of Independence, who became witness to miracles. He was the general who oversaw the country's victory in the Six Day War, the country's first Israeli-born prime minister and, as prime minister, the man who ordered the Entebbe raid. As defence minister, he threatened to break the bones of the resistance during the first intifada, yet as prime minister for a second time, became a peacemaker with the Palestinians and, later, with Jordan. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, he ultimately lost his life at the hands of a fanatic who opposed his efforts to achieve peace.

Was our guide's lamentation a chronicle of her nation's loss of innocence after five decades of existence in its modern form? Were we bearing witness to the end of the age of miracles?

As we stood there with the sun finally breaking through the clouds, a sudden recollection took me back to my childhood days as a member of Melbourne's Habonim Zionist youth movement, which is inextricably linked with Israeli Labour. We were the party of Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, Shimon Peres and generals like Moshe Dayan and Rabin. This moment recalled the magical days in 1967 when the Old City was liberated, and the nation's soldiers stood at the Wall. Two weeks after that war ended, Rabin made a speech at Hebrew University, in which he praised the sacrifice of other soldiers, those who had lost their lives—a stark reminder to the country of the harsh casualties of wars.

In the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the country was saved from potential disaster. Many regarded that as a miracle as well, but the Labour movement soon lost its way and, after almost 30 years in power, it ceded government to Menachem Begin's Herut. Incredibly, it was the party of Israel's right that oversaw the next miracle, when it made peace with Egypt while Labour remained more or less in the shadows until Rabin's 1992 re-election, 15 years later.

In Australia, we woke to the news on Sunday morning in November 1995. Rabin was dead—cut down by a Jewish assassin after months of tension and incitement by those supposedly on our side but who were opposed to the peace process. Rabin had been at a peace rally at the Kings of Israel Square (now Rabin Square) in Tel Aviv. He was walking down the City Hall steps towards his car when he was hit by two bullets from a semi-automatic pistol. The speech he had just delivered was a sincere call for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The last song that came from his lips had been one of peace.

Only such a man could have brought together so many world leaders, including those from Arab countries, for a funeral. At that very place, we now stood taking in the memory of his grieving widow and children and remembering those enduring words of US

President Bill Clinton, “shalom, chaver”.

Rabin was born on 1 March 1922 in Jerusalem, one month and one day before the birth of my father Chaim in Kraskowice, Poland, a stone’s throw from the German border. In the following decades, Rabin became a commando in the Palmach and rose to its chief of operations in the War of Independence. Within that timeframe, Chaim found himself in a Nazi slave labour camp, separated from most of his family who perished in ovens. A few years after liberation, he was married and eking out a living by moving contraband cigarettes across the Swiss border into British-occupied southern Germany.

Both men lived heroic lives in very different ways, but were connected by the miracle of survival brought about by their determination to ensure the continuation of Jewish life in the second half of the 20th century, one in our homeland, and the other in the Diaspora.

We left the graveside at Mount Herzl and moved on with the guide to our next stop, Yad Vashem. With her eulogy of Rabin fresh in my mind and aware of the place we were about to enter, I recalled the debates we had within our Zionist youth groups, and later at university, about the standard of behaviour that should be expected from the Jewish state. After all, weren’t we supposed to be “a light unto the nations”? Yet, at the same time, the nation had become embroiled in the horrors of Sabra and Shatilla in Lebanon, the occupation of land outside its recognised boundaries and the first intifada. And now, one of our number had committed a monstrous crime—the assassination of an elected leader. Wasn’t it enough that our first national poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik said our dream of Zion would be fulfilled when we produced Jewish prostitutes, Jewish thieves and a Jewish police force? Did our founders ever envisage that we could produce the Jewish assassin of a national leader, let alone one who had delivered us to the threshold of peace?

The years have rolled by and we have seen the failure of Oslo and also a second intifada, the continuation of the occupation and the failure and disbanding of peace talks with the Palestinian leadership. There is a growing list of government scandals involving the convictions and imprisonment of men in the highest offices of the land, as well as the indictment of a sitting prime minister. As an Australian, I have also experienced the frustration of witnessing from afar a legal system that produced the Malka Leifer extradition circus amid allegations the deputy health minister was criminally interfering in the case.

Recently, peace agreements with two Gulf states have coincided with more political upheaval over the country's failure to deal with the pandemic of COVID-19. In Ha'aretz, Anshell Pfeffer remarked in September 2020 that the "much-vaunted Israeli sense of solidarity in times of war has failed it in time of plague". We look on with horror at the dysfunctional state of the country and sometimes ask, what cavalry will come to its rescue?

There can be no doubt that the country's pioneers achieved miracles. I cannot help but think, therefore, that it is the likes of Rabin and so many others from Israel's earliest days, who laid the country's rock-solid foundations. It is these that will enable the people to rise above the politics of the Saturday night demonstrations in the streets of Tel Aviv and find their way back to the heart and soul of the nation.

On one of our trips back to Israel we spent two weeks in the small moshav of Shadmot Devorah in the Lower Galilee to visit our newborn granddaughter. It was beset by financial debt and in administrative receivership, but what struck me was the work ethic of the people and the variety of industry carried out, including an apiary, a vineyard, a goose farm and orange groves. The apiary is renowned for the quality of its honey. In a reminder of Naomi

Shemer's *Al Kol Eileh—Over All of These—* with its contrast of life's emotions between the sweetness of honey and the bee's sting, one senses a strong resolve among its people to succeed against all odds.

Whenever I visit the land, that resolve can be felt across the country, from Metulla in the north to the Negev and the Arava in the south. A melting pot of hard-working, industrious people striving to make their way in a difficult environment, often punching above their weight for a decent life and to put food on the table for their families.

This is Israel, a country built upon the spirit of its pioneers like Rabin, the soldier hardened by combat who died with a blood-stained piece of paper in his pocket. It was at his graveside, that our guide revealed the words written on it were those of *Shir Leshalom—Song of Peace—* that yearns for the day when the miracle of peace will also come.