

A man of honour

Mark Leibler

One of my most prized possessions, which hangs in pride of place on a wall of my study, is the first page of a set of lithographs by the renowned Israeli artist, Yosl Bergner. It is inscribed in the hand of Yitzhak Rabin: "To Mark Leibler, with long friendship. 13 April 1994".

In commemorating the 25th anniversary of Rabin's assassination, a day I remember vividly, my enduring sorrow is felt on more than one level. It is in no way abstract, as is the case with history that has been merely read or heard.

The lithograph, also inscribed by the Australian prime minister at the time, Paul Keating, was gifted to me in May 1994, after serving for ten years as president of the Zionist Federation of Australia. I had previously served as president of Zionism Victoria, and it was in this role that I first met Rabin, in the early 1980s, when he was a member of the Knesset and its prestigious Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee.

I met with him regularly thereafter, always with a cigarette in his hand and an overflowing ashtray by his side. Our final meeting, which was focused on security issues and relations with the Jewish Diaspora, took place in the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem in late October 1995, just days before his assassination.

Ask most interested observers of Israel's leaders to nominate the singular achievements of Rabin, they will speak, without hesitation, of his military heroism, the pivotal role he played in the Six Day War, the bold rescue at Entebbe and, of course, the vision for peace he sought to pursue through the Oslo accords.

I also admired Rabin for all these achievements but, looking back, it was another chapter of his remarkable life story that struck me as demonstrating a style of political leadership that regrettably no longer exists.

Less than six weeks before the general election of 1977, an election the ruling Labour Party was on a trajectory to win, Prime Minister Rabin withdrew his candidacy.

The first indication of the scandal that, for all intents and purposes, had ended Rabin's political career, came to light when a journalist learned of a US dollar account, jointly held by the prime minister, but managed by his wife Leah, in the National Bank of Washington. The account had been left open since 1973, when Rabin had ended his term as ambassador to the United States.

It was, at the time, illegal for Israeli citizens to hold foreign bank accounts. While the sum involved was small and authorities described it as a technical breach on the prime minister's part, in the case of his wife, they insisted on a full criminal investigation.

The affair had not been a major campaign issue so when Rabin withdrew his candidacy, the announcement came as a bombshell, which he explained this way: "I could not accept that, because I feel the formal responsibility is a joint responsibility and, if my wife is to be investigated, I will not hide behind parliamentary immunity."

In his biography of Rabin, published in June 1977, Robert Slater conveyed an account by Rabin's former adviser Yehuda Avner—later Israel's ambassador to Australia—of wandering the streets of Jerusalem after hearing the prime minister's shock announcement.

Avner had heard one man say: "I didn't like him but he's the most honest man in Israel". He also overheard an elderly woman shouting at her husband, "Rabin has done one thing at least—he's taught all you men how to behave towards your women!"

How many incumbent political leaders across the western world would make such a decision today? How many would hold themselves to such a high standard of integrity?

Of course, the incident did not end Rabin's political career and, following his re-election as prime minister in 1992, I continued to meet with him regularly whenever I was in Israel. He had accepted my invitation to come to Australia that year for the annual Yom Ha'atzma'ut celebrations, but the timing of the election forced him to cancel and, sadly, he never had another opportunity to visit here.

Probably the longest and most interesting time I spent with him was at a dinner I attended a few years earlier with my wife, Rosanna, at the home of Amos Eiran, when Rabin was defence minister. Eiran had been Rabin's chief-of-staff at the time of the Entebbe rescue and I had come to know him through my membership of the Board of Governors of Haifa University, where he served as president.

The third couple at the dinner were Larry and Barbi Weinberg. Larry, an American who had made his fortune in real estate, was a huge backer of AIPAC and had served as its president for several years.

The six of us spoke for many hours about all manner of issues, most earnestly about the impact of the first intifada. Rabin was a shy man but, at the same time, he exuded and engendered great confidence. His words were insightful and direct, spoken in that gravelly smoker's voice of his. Above all, he came across unfailingly authentic as a person.

This quality was evident for all to see at the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, which I attended on 26 October 1994 in the Arava Valley, north of Eilat. The handshake between Rabin and King Hussein was genuinely, unmistakably warm. The two men had met in secret for almost two decades and had come to trust one another.

No such human connection had been apparent when the Oslo accords were consummated just over a year earlier. Looking back at the official photograph marking the occasion, it appears US President Bill Clinton almost had to push Rabin into shaking hands with Yasser Arafat.

The biggest criticism anyone can (and does) make of Rabin was that he led Israel into these ultimately futile negotiations with the PLO chairman. But who was to know?

After he left office, I once had the opportunity to ask Clinton why he thought Arafat had walked away from Camp David in July 2000. He told me that the Palestinians were not ready to accept Israel's right to exist and he believed Arafat was frightened of being assassinated himself.

Which only reinforces the sense I had then—and the sense that remains with me today—that Oslo reflected Rabin's selfless desire to do whatever he could to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and with countries in the surrounding area. A desire for which he was prepared to risk and, ultimately pay with, his life—ironically, at the hands of an Israeli extremist.

I learned of his assassination while I was en route from Israel back to Melbourne on 4 November 1995. I had left Israel before the news broke, spent one night in Bangkok but didn't watch television or read the papers, and only saw the images on the TV screens when I arrived back at the airport the following morning.

I became so distressed, I could neither eat nor drink on the flight and returned home quite ill from dehydration.

In the concluding paragraph of *The Rabin Memoirs*, published in 1979, Rabin posed a profound question that challenges a present-day response from every one of us:

Jewish history shows that the Jews have always stood together in times of trial, while in tranquil days each community turned to tending its own garden. How, then, will we maintain the ties with our people once the drama and romance in our life recede?

When I look at the tensions in the relationship between Israel and the Jews of the Diaspora today—particularly in the United States—my old friend's words were characteristically prescient.

So too, perhaps, was his vision for peace.

The treaty with Jordan took effect the year before Rabin was assassinated. Despite all efforts and yearning, it has taken 26 years for the next meaningful agreements to be achieved – the Abraham Accord between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, the normalisation of full diplomatic and security relations with the Kingdom of Bahrain, and the more recent announcement of normalisation with the Republic of Sudan.

If Rabin had lived, perhaps we would be further advanced in our efforts than we are. But we have reached a milestone that points to a better destination, and that finally affords us a sense of hope that something of his dream will be realised.