

A man of peace and Jewish peoplehood

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The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin is seared in the memory of every Israeli, wherever they were that fateful night. We were at home on Kibbutz Yizreel, watching on TV the jubilant, hopeful assembly calling for peace and denouncing violence. There were smiles on everyone's faces, great performing artists, inspiring speeches and hope was in the air. The facts are well known, played and replayed in our minds and in our media throughout the last 25 years, but the questions and the anguish still remain. How suddenly were our dreams and hopes shattered without warning, though the writing had been on the wall for all to see.

On that weekend, Shoshana and I were in preparation for a trip to the United States, not knowing we would leave our homeland at a time of national mourning and political and national shiva. We felt very bad about leaving only a few days later, but were committed to participate in the meetings of the 64th Annual General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in Boston, from November 15 to 17, where Rabin had been scheduled to be the keynote speaker from Israel, a presentation that tragically failed to come to pass.

At the time, I was a member of the executive of the Israel Forum, founded in 1985. The Israel Forum had a motto, 'The Jewish Direct Line', which was derived from the Moriah Process in which I participated, that annually brought together young and emerging lay leaders from Israel and North America to address the growing distance between Israel and the Diaspora. For myself, in my involvement in the Forum, I felt, for the first time since my aliyah from Australia, that my Israeli commitment to being Jewish and my Jewish commitment to being Israeli was beginning to coalesce in a statement of purpose and action. We were

building, from the ground up, independently from the Jewish Agency, personal and communal bridges between Israel and world Jewry.

To this end, the year-long Israel experience program, Project Otzma, was established in 1986–1987, by the Israel Forum in partnership with the Council of Jewish Federations and participating Federations throughout North America. I had the privilege of being in the group of Forum leaders that conceived and implemented the Otzma program, as well as serving as its program evaluator. At the same time, I also served as a lay leader on the Afula/Gilboa partnership with Connecticut and Rhode Island. I had committed to give a few lectures to a number of Federation Young Leadership groups in communities in Connecticut and Rhode Island, on our way from New York to Boston.

In 1995, the media was pre-digital. While the news of the assassination had arrived, its implications were not well understood by our local hosts. Nor were they aware of the depth of our Israeli sorrow and grief. Arriving at the site of my first presentation in Connecticut, I couldn't connect with my audience without making a yizkor statement, so I asked for yizkor candles to be lit and we conducted a discussion about the personal and political tragedy that had befallen us all. Only later did we move on to our subject. Subsequently, we made our way to Boston still in shock, magnified by a sense that the shock itself was not shared to the same degree by some of the affiliated, committed American Jews we had just encountered. Moreover, this shock as an Israeli in America was alien to my former roots in the very Zionist Melbourne Jewish community in which I grew up, where I imagined a quite different response would be felt in the Jewish street.

On the first night of the General Assembly, somewhat dazed and depressed, we gathered informally when Avrum Burg, then chair of the Jewish Agency, took the podium and made an impromptu speech that, in one move, brought together all those present,

into one global Jewish family of grief. Only then were we all able to begin to mourn; we are still mourning a quarter of a century later.

The General Assembly proceeded as it was bound to do, with its re-structured program that included commissions on Jewish identity and continuity, a well-attended session on Israel–Diaspora relations, as well as committee discussions on Project Otzma. Shimon Peres (by video), Henry Kissinger and Israeli Finance Minister Avraham Shochat delivered important memorial addresses for Rabin.

Echoing my own sentiments at the time, JTA reported on 21 November,

Many of the Israeli participants said they were surprised that Israel did not assume a higher profile on the overall agenda. They said the assassination has torn their country's fabric apart and raises critical questions about Jewish peoplehood that they would have liked to have had addressed.

In the same JTA article, Shoshana Cardin, Chair of the UIA, reported that Rabin was calling for closer partnership between Israel and the Diaspora in the weeks before the assassination. It was this clarion call, together with Rabin's courageous call for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, that raised my hopes on both those fronts simultaneously.

Indeed, in his message to the Jewish communities in the Diaspora on the occasion of Israel's Independence Day in April 1994, Rabin wrote,

We invite you to be partners in the great success story that is Israel. Israel is the center of our common Jewish being, of our identity and our heritage, and your contribution and involvement are as essential as ever. At the same time, Israel must find ways of working together with you to ensure the thriving continuity of the

Jewish people. Israel and world Jewry as one people will master the formidable challenges of a new era”.

Flashback 15 years earlier: Rabin was not my hero, neither was his nemesis Peres. In 1979, I was drafted by the Ichud kibbutz movement to take up the position of the world secretary of Habonim. At that time, Yigal Allon was instrumental in facilitating the unification of the two largest kibbutz movements, Ichud and Meuchad. Allon was also head of the World Labour Zionist Movement, where I had the opportunity to work with him. After Allon's February 1980 death, Rabin took up the mantle of leadership of the Allon camp, which became the Rabin camp, inside the Labour movement. The Rabin camp asserted its ambition for the leadership of the entire Labour movement, in opposition to the Peres camp. The former was seen by many as divisive, threatening Labour's political prospects in the country. On a far smaller scale, for me, the Rabin camp literally divided the alumni of Habonim settled in over 20 kibbutzim. It generated division amongst those alumni within World Habonim institutions I chaired and within the newly merging united kibbutz movement. I had no special allegiance to Rabin or Peres, neither of whom were doves in my eyes, both being closer to the Land of Israel movement represented by Allon and Achdut Avoda. Nevertheless, I decided I had to find out why they were letting their egos generate a confrontational discourse within a party that had just lost power to Begin and had lost leadership of the country. I decided I would meet each of them and ask them why this was happening.

Access was not so difficult for me as a kibbutznik. The late Yisrael Avidor from Kfar Hanassi set up a meeting for me with Peres in his office. Shimon Sheves, who was to remain Rabin's close and loyal advisor for many years, from Kibbutz Afik, organised the meeting with Rabin. Both men perceived me as someone who could bring supporters to their camp, and both were equally displeased by what I had come to say. After the pleasantries, I asked them why

the Rabin–Peres conflict was necessary. What was it bringing to the Labour movement, to the kibbutz movement, to Habonim? It was tearing us apart for no good reason. The only beneficiaries, I said, would be the right. I was trying to hold on to an inclusive united left in Israel, and to avoid the fragmentation characteristic of the Labour movement, throughout its history, from its past until its final demise today. Neither meeting ended well. I joined neither camp on principle. I was on the side of Labour unity and would not allow Habonim to be torn asunder, even by historical giants of the Labour movement. Little did I know that these two gentlemen would, one day, stand together as leaders of the peace movement calling for peace between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, and partnership between Israeli and Diaspora Jewry.

In these last 25 years in Israel, the risk of division and need for unity have increased. Judaism and democracy remain chartered on a collision course, while Israel and world Jewry are drifting apart. Rabin addressed these dangers in seeking peace between Jews, with our Arab neighbours and with the Jewish world.

Today, in the corona twilight of 2020, I remember Rabin as a man of courage who knew not only how to stand resolutely by his guns but also how to muster the courage to change his mind for the sake of the nation and its future. Rabin taught us to look forward, not backward; to be a leader in a changing world; to make the change, not follow it. Rabin taught us that an Israeli soldier can pursue peace with the Palestinians and that an Israeli can embrace world Jewry. He called on us all to pursue Jewish peoplehood together with peace with our Arab neighbours; both goals simultaneously, not just one without the other.

May his memory be an inspiration to all Jews everywhere.