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YITZHAK RABIN AND THE ISRAELI POLITY: A CULTURAL MEMORIAL

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**Two Lessons and Two Promises / A Captain Among Captains / Two Yitzhaks /
A Shy and Strategic Thinker / A Life Come Full Circle**

[Editor's Note: In light of the tragic assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, we have delayed the issue of the *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* scheduled for November 1 to allow us to present the following memorial to our late prime minister.]

Two Lessons and Two Promises

When the State of Israel was founded in 1948, it was rooted in two unspoken, very real premises and the two promises that flowed from them. Both were based on an effort to learn from the fall of the Second Jewish Commonwealth nearly 2,000 years earlier. Two principal lessons were drawn from that ancient catastrophe.

One was particularly identified with David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, who taught that in order to survive, the small Jewish state had to maintain its alliance with the superpower that was dominant in the region. The

fall of Judea was based upon the Judean challenge to Rome's supremacy, pinning its hopes on the ability to get assistance from Rome's rival to the east, Parthia, that did not materialize. In the face of the strong sympathies of the left wing of the Labor movement with the Soviet Union, Ben-Gurion insisted on developing the strongest possible ties with the United States, the successor to Great Britain as the dominant superpower in the region.

The second lesson was that the Second Commonwealth had fallen because of the civil wars among the Jews and that for the Third Commonwealth to survive there had to be an absolute prohibition on Jews shedding the blood of other Jews. This position was adopted as Menachem Begin's principal lesson from the past. It was tested when the Irgun Zvai Leumi under his command attempted to bring in arms during the first United Nations-imposed truce between Israel and the invading

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Arab states, aboard the ship *Altelena*. Ben-Gurion was determined to force the *Altelena* to surrender, in part to honor the truce but in even larger measure to assure that there would be only one army in the new state, the official Israel Defense Forces, subject to government orders.

Yitzhak Rabin, then a young Palmach commander and later to rise to the highest positions the state could offer, embraced both of those lessons and made them his own. Throughout his public career he strove to deepen and strengthen Israel's relationship with the United States and from the time he commanded the IDF unit sent by Ben-Gurion to capture or stop the *Altelena* until his tragic assassination, he shared the view that Jews should not and would not take the lives of other Jews in Israel.

A Captain Among Captains

Israelis, even those who admired Prime Minister Rabin, did not realize the high level of admiration that he had won among the leaders of the nations. The outpouring of those leaders for his funeral was the first public demonstration of the world's leaders' admiration for him and his work. It surprised, even shocked, the Israelis, but in a way it was characteristic of Rabin that while he was unable to attract that kind of admiration and appreciation from the Israeli public, to the world's leaders he was a real leader. As the old joke would have it, among the captains he was a captain.

What we and the rest of the world saw at his funeral and the events surrounding it was the genuine grief of leading men. Undoubtedly, some among the 86 leaders who gathered in Jerusalem from that many states and nations came to the funeral as a sign of their endorsement of the Rabin-initiated peace process and their desire to send a message that it should continue. Still others were there because President Clinton made the trip and they felt that, in that case, they had to be there as well. But the genuine grief could be seen to be all too real, from Bill Clinton to Henry Kissinger to King Hussein to James Baker, to mention only a few of the seriously grieving world statesmen.

Nor were his one-time adversaries, Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat, any less grieved. One cannot forget Henry Kissinger, hardly able to keep from breaking down when interviewed on CNN, or the tears in Hussein's eyes at the funeral, or President Clinton's truly masterful religious eulogy or his "Shalom Haver." It was obvious by the end of the funeral that Rabin had been seen as much less to his own people than he was to the leaders of the world.

Two Yitzhaks

What kind of man was Yitzhak Rabin? In critical ways he was like his namesake, the Patriarch Yitzhak (Isaac) of the Bible. Like the Isaac of the Bible, Yitzhak Rabin lived all his life in Israel. He was the state's first native-born prime minister and, except for leaving Israel in an official capacity, i.e., his years in Washington as Israeli ambassador, he never left the country. Of all the patriarchs, only Isaac was born and lived out his life in Israel. His father Abraham migrated to the country at God's command and his son Jacob left the country to go down to Egypt.

Relative to most politicians, Yitzhak Rabin was quiet and shy rather than outgoing. According to the Midrash, the Patriarch Isaac's quiet came from the trauma of his near sacrifice by his father. We have no such explanation for Yitzhak Rabin, but the similarity is there nevertheless. Rabin expected to be a farmer but was forced into public service by the exigencies of the time, first as a fighter for Israel's independence in the Palmach from the age of 19, then in the IDF, and finally in the political realm. Necessity called him to that public life and he gave the impression that he was never entirely comfortable with it or at least with his political role, though he fought hard for position once he accepted the call, undoubtedly believing that his own strategic thinking made it necessary for him to be the top leader for the sake of the country. In the end, like the biblical Isaac, he too was sacrificed, only his sacrifice was consummated after he had lived his three score and ten years and while he was still the leader of his country.

A Shy and Strategic Thinker

Yitzhak Rabin was a strategic thinker who thought long and hard alone to formulate an understanding of the situation and to reach conclusions as to how to deal with it. Once he had formulated such an understanding, he stuck to it. Even if his heart wanted to lead him in other directions, his reason held him to course.

Thus it was with the peace process. After years of searching for a Jordanian option which would link the Arabs in the territories with Jordan for a future settlement, he came to the conclusion that the Arabs in question had become Palestinians in their minds and that therefore it was necessary to deal with them as such. He concluded that their leadership was not prepared for a simply Jordanian option and that the only Palestinian leadership there was with whom a workable deal could be reached was the PLO.

Once he reached that understanding, despite his distaste emotionally for recognizing and dealing with the PLO and Yasser Arafat, he drew his conclusions, stuck to them, and began the peace process. The only thing that was not difficult for him in this was the idea of territorial compromise since he had always seen that as essential for a solution. What had changed was the partner he needed to make the compromise.

It was Rabin's character that once he reached his conclusions on any subject, he was convinced of their correctness and believed that others would reach his conclusions in due time. Even though he believed that others would come to see what he saw, he was impatient with those who had not yet reached that recognition, those who did not see his strategy, and he showed that impatience publicly on many occasions, often to his detriment and the detriment of his policies.

Yitzhak Rabin had a keenly analytic mind. In my own experiences with him, that was always the impression he left. Sometimes he was too analytic publicly for a public figure. Scholars and advisors on the sidelines can afford to be analytic in public. Statesmen have to be careful that their analysis does not become self-fulfilling prophecy when stated publicly, but Rabin would make his analyses

all too public all too often.

Not only that, but his shyness made him seem that he was insensitive to his constituency. In fact, he may have felt the anxieties and even pain of the opposition much more than most others in his party and his government since his heart shared many of the concerns of the opposition, but publicly he could only berate them, perhaps because he shared their heartfelt feelings, but his mind had led him down a very different path and he believed that others should recognize that as well.

All in all, Yitzhak Rabin was a loner with only a few close friends. His close friends were indeed close, almost like family, and they, like his family, apparently adored him just as the world's leaders who could see him leading up close admired and respected him. To the Israeli public and indeed to most of his government, he remained a loner. For example, he would receive delegations alone without staff, without the usual supporting cast of characters that other heads of government like to keep around them. He had no need to do so and, indeed, they only interfered.

I was privileged to have had personal contact with Yitzhak Rabin on numerous occasions in different circumstances including working with him during his first prime ministership to prepare him for his visit to Washington when, *inter alia*, he spoke to the U.S. Congress (I co-authored his speech). Subsequently, I presented to him my ideas for possible federal solutions to the Israel-Palestinian-Jordanian conflict. I believe that I can safely say that he was always ready to relinquish lands west of the Jordan River for peace, fully expecting that he would have to do so, and already had a fairly well-formed belief that separation between Israel and the Palestinians was necessary for a solution to the problems. While he never actually rejected my proposals, his one comment about them was, "We'll see," which I understood at the time to be basically a rejection.

Subsequently, we had occasion to discuss Israel's relations with American Jewry. In our conversations he was always extraordinarily self-confident and learned what he had to about the American Jewish community while serving as

ambassador, a knowledge that he described chapter and verse. When I was head of the Bar-Ilan Political Studies Department I invited him to speak to us. He was then out of office and I recall his presentation as a beautiful, even exemplary, analysis of the situation.

A Life Come Full Circle

At the end, Yitzhak Rabin's life came full circle. As commander of the unit sent to dispose of the Altelena, Rabin gave the order to fire on that ship, killing several members of its crew, and only Menachem Begin's forbearance prevented civil war, saving the fledgling state from that terrible result. It is ironic that Rabin's own life was ended by a Jewish extremist so many years later.

In one other way Yitzhak Rabin was like the biblical Yitzhak. When Isaac's father Abraham died, the Bible tells us (Genesis 25:9) that the old patriarch was buried by his sons Isaac and Ishmael who came together after years of being apart to pay this last respect to their parent. Rabin in his last years also was reunited with the descendants of Ishmael to try to rebuild the family relationship that had been disrupted by the conflict over this land. That is his legacy to all of us, Israelis, Jews, Palestinians, Arabs, the region, and the world.

We do not know as yet whether that rediscovery of the family relationship and its translation into a system for living together is possible. Yitzhak Rabin himself was hesitant about it, thinking that separation was a better goal for Israel and the Palestinians than integration. But in that little land that we call Eretz Israel and they call Falastin and Jordan, there is no possibility for a complete separation no matter how much some may want it. Hence the agreements that have emerged from the Oslo process, Oslo I and Oslo II and the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, call for substantial measures of cooperation, masked by a recognition of basic separation.

Perhaps that will be the answer; a judicious combination of separation and cooperation may turn out to be similar to what Yitzhak Rabin envisaged, though given the ways of the world and the likelihood of unforeseen circumstances and changes, accordingly, we cannot predict now what will be. We do know that he has set us all on a peaceful path and perhaps even a path to peace.

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