

Remembering Rabin... 20 Years Later

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I remember everything about that moment...It's like an out of body experience. To this day I can see myself standing in the room (I remember the furniture, the carpeting, the lighting), I can see myself watching the television, hearing the words for the first time. It happened not long after I had become *shomer Shabbat*, traditionally Sabbath observant. I had been relaxing at my girlfriend's apartment all afternoon on Shabbat...her name was Sari Levinson. It was November, just after the clocks changed, and Shabbat ended pretty early. We had plans to go out with friends that night, and after we did Havdalah together, Sari went to get changed in the other room. I flipped on the television, having not watched it or seen any news for the past 24-hours. And what happened next became for me a "core memory," for those of you who have seen the beautiful Pixar movie *Inside Out*; A moment in time so firmly ensconced in my memory bank that I will never forget it. It was the top story on NBC Nightly News on the evening of November 4, 1995. Brian Williams, the weekend anchor, delivered the bulletin in a somber voice as an unimaginable image flashed in the upper right corner of the screen: A picture of Yitzhak Rabin, and under his name the dates 1922-1995. I stared at that image incredulously as I heard Williams say words I could hardly believe "Yitzhak Rabin gunned down at a pro-government rally tonight in Tel Aviv. The 73 year old Rabin was rushed to a hospital where he died of his wounds a short time later." The rest is a blur...I'm pretty sure I yelled for Sari to come in from the other room. I probably did some channel surfing to find out as much as I could, since I just caught the tail end of William's report. The aftermath of that night for me, at least, can be described as a total loss of naiveté. Who could possibly want to kill this extraordinary, Nobel Peace Prize-winning, elder statesman; a decorated war hero turned peacemaker; the mastermind of the Six Day War victory that brought Jerusalem into Jewish hands; a man who spoke so movingly that very night before thousands of people at a rally in downtown Tel Aviv about the need to seize the opportunity for peace.

“Ani rotzeh le'hodot lechol echad ve'echad mikem, he said in his deep, baritone voice: I want to thank each and every one of you, she'hityasefkan kneged ha'alimut u'be-ad ha'shalom...who have gathered here tonight to oppose violence and stand up for peace.”

And then, just moments later that spokesman for peace was felled by an assassin's bullet. It was absolutely inconceivable. I learned a lot about myself, about my Jewish identity, and about this founding father of the State of Israel that night. And, *l'illui nishmato*, as a tribute to his soul and his legacy I want to share some of that with you...

I mentioned my loss of naiveté, a certain innocence about being Jewish that was radically altered on the night of November 4, 1995. After getting my head around the news that Rabin had been assassinated, I confess to you that my first thought, my first assumption was that he was murdered by an Arab, by a Palestinian. Even though Rabin was singing songs of peace, swaying along with thousands of supporters that night, Israel was actually under siege. The Beit Lid Massacre, the first suicide bombing was earlier that year, killing 21 soldiers—all between the ages of 18-24— on their way home, on leave for the weekend. The Kfar Darom bus bombing was that year, the Ramat Gan bus #20 bombing, the Ramat Eshkol bus bombing... Israel was reeling with violence in 1995, and I assumed that Rabin's killer was a member of Palestinian Islamic Jihad since that was also the year the organization entered into a covenant with Hamas. But it didn't take long before it was revealed to the entire world that the assassin was not a Palestinian, but a Jew. A “religious” Jew, who claimed to be acting on the authority of Torah law to stop someone who was perceived to be threatening the existence of the Jewish people. I will not give him the dignity of uttering his name here in this holy place, on Shabbat, but the assassin was prodded by an element among ultra-Orthodox settlers who thought the Oslo Peace Process that Rabin intimated was an act of treason against the Jewish people. They dressed Rabin's effigy in Nazi uniforms at rallies, pronounced kabbalistic death curses upon him, and incited the worse kind of internecine hatred.

To tell you the truth, as an American Jew in his early 20's, living in Columbus, OH the idea that one Jew could take the life of another; that the Torah that I was just falling in love with could motivate a religious Jew to fire a bullet into the body of the Prime Minister of the State of Israel was a total shock to my system. I'm not even sure if back then I was aware of the minor fast day of Tzom Gedaliah, which falls on the day after Rosh Hashanah every year. Following the destruction of the first Temple, in the year 424 BCE on Rosh Hashanah, Gedaliah ben Akhikam, the Babylonian appointed governor of the remnant Jewish community in the land of Israel was assassinated by another Jew, Ishmael Ben Netaniah, a jealous, angry political opponent. Since then some traditional Jews fast each year on the third of Tishrei in commemoration of that tragedy. Incidentally some have suggested that Rabin's death also be associated with Tzom Gedalia, linking the two murdered Jewish leaders and memorializing them together. But as I said, I don't even think I had heard of that fast day when I was 21 years old! I learned in Hebrew school that our first and foremost allegiance is to our fellow Jews. I marched proudly in the rally for Soviet Jewry in Washington on a frigid March day in 1987. I wore a wrist band every day with the name of an Ethiopian Jewish immigrant to Israel during Operation Solomon in the early 90's. I co-organized a yellow ribbon protest at my high school when the first Bush administration threatened to withhold loan guarantees to Israel. As a college freshman I attended my first of many AIPAC Conferences, lobbying the congressman from my college town—whose name was John Boehner—to support Israel. The idea that a Jew would turn against another Jew was totally outside my comprehension. But now I know that this is still a scourge within some parts of our community...that the Jewish people also has our share of extremists and haters who promote violence and bigotry, and who the mainstream Jewish community has an even greater post-Rabin responsibility to repudiate and to keep in check.

What I also learned that night was about Yitzhak Rabin the statesman. I knew about Rabin the warrior. Rabin the strategic mind who was the army's celebrated chief of staff and defense minister; I knew about the young Rabin who fought in the Palmach, the pre-State militia that protected Jewish communities in the land of Israel. But it was only after his death that I appreciated the profound respect

the world had for this statesman. Just last year, Sari and I were invited to a national conference for cardiologists here in Washington. No, neither one of us are cardiologists, but a member of Har Shalom organized the black tie event and Bill Clinton was the keynote speaker. After he gave his prepared remarks, he made himself available for questions and answers from the audience. Some heart doctor in the room raised his or her hand and asked the former president, “If there was one thing you could change in world during the era of your presidency, what would it be?” Without skipping a beat Clinton said, “I would have stopped the bullet that killed Yitzhak Rabin.” I almost fell off my chair. Why would the 42nd President of the United States, a Baptist born in Hope, Arkansas say that preventing the assassination of the Jewish prime minister of Israel would have been the one thing in history he would have changed during the era of his presidency? This was not a crowd of pro-Israel lobbyists or Jewish leaders, although I’m sure there was more than one Jewish cardiologist in the room! The fact is that Rabin garnered respect from so many—Arab leaders included— because he knew the costs of war first hand. Because he had seen the blood-soaked battlefields, the excruciating loss of life, and although he knew he was taking calculated risks for peace, he had the courage to lead his nation to take those risks and put their faith in the possibility for peace. He wasn’t flashy, he wasn’t flamboyant, and he was never weighed down by controversy or ethical lapses like some of his successors. He stood for pragmatism, he stood for peace negotiated from a position of strength, and he inspired people to believe in his vision, because of his own life story. I had some serious misgivings about Oslo as a college student. I always found it hard to trust the career terrorist Yasser Arafat who even when he was speaking about peace wore military fatigues and a holster on his hip. But I also remember thinking, if Rabin thinks this is the right path, who is this Ohio boy to second guess him? We haven’t had leaders that inspire such confidence quite like that since Rabin.

In 1937 the 15 year old Yitzhak Rabin, dreamed of becoming an irrigation engineer. In the words of his widow Leah, “that expertise would make Palestine the fertile country of Theodor Herzl’s dreams.”^[1] He

^[1] Rabin, Leah. *Rabin, Our Life, His Legacy*. New York, 1997. Page 61

enrolled at the Kadoorie Agricultural School in the Lower Galilee. His mother fled the Bolsheviks in Russia, his father ran from the pogroms in Ukraine, and they settled together in Jerusalem where Yitzhak was born. All he wanted to do was to till that land, to make it bloom, and to live in peace with his family in the land of his ancestors. He loved the land of Israel...literally, the earth, the farms, the trees, the orchards. But when his tranquil agricultural school was targeted by Arab guerillas, young Yitzhak was forced to set aside the hoe and the shovel and instead take up the gun and uniform. Instead of pursuing his pastoral dreams, he answered the call of the Jewish people. He lived and he died for the protection, the safety, the resilience of Am Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael.

I keep this portrait of Rabin in my office, and I look at it every day. As I too devote my life to the Jewish people, albeit in very different ways, I continue to be moved by the loyalty and commitment to the Jewish people that Rabin embodied. Sometimes I wonder what he would think of the world today...of Israel today...of the ongoing standoff and recurring violence that continues to plague Israel's existence alongside the Palestinians. I wonder what he would think of Israel's pariah status in many parts of the world, and I imagine how it might be different if he was still at the helm. Mostly though, when I try to look into his grayish-greenish eyes in this picture, I feel so proud to be a Jew and a Zionist. My heart continues to break because the kind of death he suffered is a terrible disgrace given his lifetime of devotion to the Jewish people. But the words he spoke just a month before his death some miles from here on the White House lawn continue to reverberate with prophetic hope: "We should not let the land flowing with milk and honey flow with blood and tears." On this 20th anniversary of his tragic departure from this world, I pray more fervently than ever that his vision becomes a reality. And I pray that we all have the courage to stand up for the State of Israel, even in the most difficult times, just as Rabin did, every day of his life. *Yehi Zichro Baruch*... may the memory of Yitzhak Rabin inspire us always.