

## The Legacy of Shimon Peres: Yizkor 2016

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Not many people can lay claim to being as beloved as Israeli leader Shimon Peres was upon his death. The funeral of the last of Israel's founding fathers attracted 100 foreign leaders and dignitaries from 70 countries. The accolades poured in from around the world. Bill Clinton said Peres "started off life as Israel's brightest student, became its best teacher, and ended up its biggest dreamer." Prime Minister Netanyahu said that Peres had "lived a life of purpose... he was a great man of Israel, he was a great man of the world."

His keen intellect, love of words, books and ideas was widely recognized. He was praised not just for his vision of peace and tireless devotion to his elusive goal, but for his embrace of technology and his eternal optimism. Erudite, he was always the dreamer, always looking to the future. I recall hearing him speak almost 20 years ago in Jerusalem to rabbis on an Israel Bonds mission about the promise of nanotechnology, a concept most of the rabbis in the audience had not yet heard of and had no idea what he was talking about.

In Kiev at the Yalta European Strategy conference, last year, Victor Pinchuk, the conference host asked Peres from the podium to reveal the source of his youthful energy and vigor. Ever the pensive philosopher, Shimon laughed and answered: "It's very simple. The sign of great age is contemplating the dreams that one has fulfilled. The measure of youth, by contrast, is the number of those still to come true."

In addition to being a member of Knesset, he served as his country's Transportation Minister, Information Minister, Regional Affairs Minister, Foreign Minister, Finance Minister, Defense Minister, and Prime Minister. He used the final position he held as President of Israel, to continue to advance causes he believed in, and become particularly beloved on the international scene. Viewed around the world and in Israel as a beloved and wise grandfather, when he completed his term he was the oldest head of state, and had an approval rating above 80%.

But it was not always like this. He did not always enjoy the adulation and admiration of his fellow countrymen.

Although he served twice as Israel's Prime Minister, Peres ran five times, but was never elected to the post on his own. Viewed as ruthless and cunning earlier in his career he was not trusted. He tried to undermine his nemesis, with whom he fought to become leader of his party, and ultimately with whom he shared the Nobel Peace Prize, Yitzhak Rabin. When he ran for president the first time, all the polls and media assumed he was a shoo-in against the relatively obscure Moshe Katzav. With only 120 voters, because the Knesset, Israel's parliament elects the President it was a shock when he lost to Katzav. When Katzav was removed from office because he was convicted of rape and sexual

harassment, the country quickly turned to the runner up, and Peres became President, at the age of 84, serving until he was 91 years old.

Most of those who eulogized him spoke glowingly of his tenacious devotion to the pursuit of peace and his untiring service to his country. They spoke of his optimism and faith in the future, of the longevity of his career, of what he accomplished, his role in establishing Israel's defense forces, and other important contributions, including the raid on Entebbe, while some of the tributes mentioned the failure of the Oslo peace accords.

While all of these were important, they leave out a part of his legacy that can inspire all of us, and is the reason why I speak about Peres today in our Yizkor service.

Shimon Peres could have easily been discouraged by all the defeats he encountered. Labeled a "loser" by his contemporaries because of his multiple defeats and his inability to win an election, he would have been justified had he given up and rode off into the sunset. But he did not. To me that was the true greatness of Peres and what we should remember about him.

We can learn a number of lessons from the life of Shimon Peres. First and foremost, never give up. Continue and persevere. Follow your dreams. Pursue your passion. Believe in yourself. Don't be discouraged despite setbacks and obstacles. He showed that it is possible to change the course and trajectory of your life. Believe in the future, even when you are in your late 80's and early 90's. Never stop growing and learning new things. Just a few weeks before he died, at the age of 93, Peres opened an Instagram account.

Peres was born in a shtetl in Poland. On more than one occasion I heard him tell the story that when he left for Israel at the age of 11, his beloved grandfather, who was a rabbi told him to never forget that he was a Jew. Never forget where he came from and who he was. Never forget his heritage. That grandfather and all those who stayed behind in that village were all murdered by the Nazis.

He carried that message with him throughout his entire life. He achieved greatness because he never forgot who he was and where he came from. He focused on the future because he remembered, studied and honored the past and his heritage.

Today we are here to remember our loved ones who came before us and where we come from. We recall how they lived their lives, the devotion and sacrifices they made on our behalf. The messages they imparted to us.

We stand on their shoulders, for without them we would not be here. We are the repositories, beneficiaries and products of our departed whom we remember and are the products of the influence they had on us.

Elie Wiesel, another giant who passed away this past year writes in the introduction to his book, Souls on Fire, "My father, an enlightened spirit, believed in man. My grandfather, a fervent Hasid, believed in God. The one taught me to speak, the other to sing. Both loved stories. And when I tell mine, I hear their voices."

Let us hear the voices of those who are no longer with us. Let us take to heart the words of the simple rav, the rabbi who was the grandfather of the last of Israel's founding fathers as we now remember and honor, as did Shimon Peres throughout his life, those who came before us, and where we come from.

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