

20 Years After Death, Rabin's Leadership Unmatched

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Amidst the breakdown of their negotiations with the Palestinians and a wave of terrorist attacks rolling across the country, Israelis will gather on the evening of October 31 in Tel Aviv honor the memory of Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated 20 years ago. And they will continue to wrestle with the meaning for Israel's future of his life and tragic death.

On Nov. 4, 1995, in the heart of Israel's Mediterranean metropolis, the prime minister was shot in the back at point-blank range as he left the stage of a peace rally attended by some 100,000 people. The assassin, Yigal Amir, was a law student and fanatical orthodox Jew. Amir was consumed with the conviction that implementation of the 1993 Oslo Accords, which Rabin, leader of the Labor Party, had signed with Palestinian Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat in the Rose Garden of the White House, betrayed the Jewish people by handing over to the Palestinians parts of the ancient homeland God gave to the Jews.

Rabin was a war hero and a man of the center-left. He was viewed as iron-willed and thoroughly schooled in the harsh realities of the cruel neighborhood in which Israel resided. His sobriety and pragmatism, many thought, made him uniquely capable of achieving a peace with the Palestinians that would preserve and perhaps enhance Israel's security. This perception has grown with the passage of time.

The tendency on the Israeli left is to view Rabin's murder as the pivotal moment in the Jewish state's history. In his life, and even more in his death, Rabin—who signed a peace treaty with Jordan in 1994, the year after Oslo and the year before he was gunned down—represented the hope of an historic reconciliation not only with the Palestinians but also with the surrounding Arab world. Today, an increasing number of Israelis despair at ever reaching a decent resolution to the bloody conflict.

But history is rarely so tidy. Yigal Amir's heinous deed did not unleash the powerful forces that continue to thwart Israel's efforts to make peace with the Palestinians. To believe that, it is necessary to ignore the militant ideas that long have driven Palestinian nationalism. It also requires overlooking the ambiguities inherent in the Zionism that brought Israel into being.

In his recent book, "Killing a King: The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the Remaking of Israel," Dan Ephron reiterates the view that Rabin's murder "set off a chain reaction that would shift the power in Israel from the pragmatists to the ideologues." But the author's own compelling account tells a subtler story.

A former Jerusalem bureau chief for Newsweek, Ephron cites veteran Israeli journalist Nahum Barnea, who “coined the term ‘victim of peace’ to convey the irony of a peace process that had caused a surge rather than an ebb in violence.” The suicide attacks the Palestinians launched against Israel in the wake of Oslo did not stem from the belief that Rabin had failed to go far enough and fast enough in the pursuit of peace. They came from the terrorists’ repudiation of the very notion of coexistence with Israel.

Moreover, it was not the Oslo Accords and Rabin’s death that awakened messianic longings inside Israel and gave birth to the settler movement. Those were the product of Israel’s astonishing victory 28 years before in June 1967 over Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the Six-Day War—during which Rabin served as the military’s chief of staff—and the Jewish state’s unexpected conquest of the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, and the West Bank.

Intoxication with victory was everywhere in Israel, but nowhere more so than among religious nationalists. Many of them interpreted Israeli control of the West Bank—which they referred to with the Biblical terms Judea and Samaria and which comprises a substantial part of the ancient Kingdom of Israel—as a fulfillment of divine promises and as presenting a golden opportunity, if not imposing a stern obligation, to build communities in the heart of the Promised Land.

Haaretz columnist Ari Shavit comes closer to the mark in arguing that Rabin would not have solved the conflict, but that his particular medley of virtues is more necessary than ever. “He was fundamentally realistic, skeptical and pessimistic,” writes Shavit. “He knew that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was insoluble.” But Rabin also believed that Israel should strive to mitigate the conflict, so he would have sought to “partition the land” through “interim agreements.”

But how does that distinguish Rabin from his successors?

In July 2000 at Camp David, Labor Prime Minister Ehud Barak made a generous offer only to have Arafat, by then president of the Palestinian Authority, walk out of the negotiations. In August 2005, Likud Prime Minister Ariel Sharon handed the Gaza Strip over to the Gazans; since then Israel has been forced to launch three military operations to prevent Hamas from bombarding Israeli civilian populations with mortars and rockets. In 2008, Kadima Prime Minister Ehud Olmert proposed a far-reaching plan for Palestinian statehood that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas left on the negotiating table. And in early September, Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared his willingness to enter into negotiations without precondition. Abbas has declined to take him up on it.

Any sober assessment of the situation Israel confronts would take into account Palestinian recalcitrance to pursue a peace agreement based on the principle embraced by Israel and much of the international community of two states for two peoples. It would recognize that many of today’s knife-wielding teenage Palestinian terrorists come from East Jerusalem,

possess Israeli ID cards that enable them to travel freely throughout the country, and are not impoverished or oppressed in any ordinary sense of those terms. It would also acknowledge that through its schools, government-run media, and mosques that function under its watch, the Palestinian Authority persists in indoctrinating those subject to its authority with hatred for Jews and the state of Israel.

A pragmatic assessment would also come to grips with the intellectual origins of the political divisions *within* Israel between secular and religious Jews. The seeds are sown deep within the character of Zionism itself. Zionism arose in the 19th century as a secular and nationalist movement. It sought to rescue Jews from persecution by building a modern nation state in which they could fend for themselves. But the power that the Jewish imagination exercised over political Zionism—illustrated most dramatically by the conviction that the Jewish state must be established in the land of Israel—was a consequence of the cultural capital accumulated by the Jewish people over millennia. That cultural capital was bound up with a life devoted to Torah and Talmud study, and living in accordance with God's revealed law. The settler movement and the messianism to which it is prone have a root in the political Zionism that is supposed to be their antithesis.

To honor the memory of Yitzhak Rabin—and the sobriety and pragmatism that is his greatest legacy—Israelis must undertake a clear-eyed reckoning with the ideas that divide them from the Palestinians, and those that divide them from one another.

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