



Reuven Rivlin, President of the State of Israel In Conversation with Robert Satloff, Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Scholar-Statesman Award Virtual Gala
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On November 19, 2020, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy conferred its Scholar-Statesman Award on Reuven Rivlin, the president of the State of Israel.

The Scholar-Statesman Award celebrates outstanding leaders who, through their public service and professional achievements, exemplify the idea that sound scholarship and a discerning knowledge of history are essential to wise and effective policy and the advancement of peace and security in the Middle East. Previous honorees include King Abdullah II of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, President Bill Clinton of the United States, Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom, and U.S. secretaries of state Condoleezza Rice, George P. Shultz, and Henry Kissinger.

Robert Satloff: President Rivlin, congratulations, how does it feel to be a Scholar-Statesman. It's not quite the Nobel Prize, but it's the next best thing.

Reuven Rivlin: First of all, thank you, thank you, I am very honored and pleased to be awarded with this medal. It is really something that means to me very much - especially when I know that the one who got before me this medal was the King Abdullah, *Melek 'Abd Allāh ath-thani*, which means King Abdallah II, the King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, who is very important. He is very important to us. He is very important as a neighbor. And he is very important as a real figure that could bring understanding and could create along with all the people in our region the understanding that we have to build trust, and I appreciate him very much.

From time to time we are talking and it's always a pleasure to talk to him as much as it was always a pleasure to talk to his father - in spite of some differences of opinion from time to time. Of course, we have a tragedy that we are carrying on our shoulders for the last 120 years, and we have to find the way and King Abdullah II is one of the personalities, and the leaders of the region who can bring us to understanding.

Robert Satloff: Very good. So, Mr. President, if you don't mind, we Americans, we have an idea of what a president is and what a president does. In Israel, a president is a little bit different, and every president fulfills his responsibility in his own unique way. How do you conceive of the job of the president of the State of Israel?

Reuven Rivlin: Well the job of the president of Israel is first of all and foremost is to be and to be ready to be one of the people. To try and be one of the people, to hear, to hear what they have to say, to hear their complaints, to hear their demands, to hear how are they feeling, and to hear of course of their cries from time to time. It is very important because the people of Israel are very, very, the community of the people of Israel, is very very complicated. Because you know, we have brought almost 4,000,000 Jews, to start with, from all over the world. They came from places in which you are talking 70 different languages. And not one of us knew English as King Abdullah knows, and we tried to really connect one with each other.

Now it is easier. Now everyone in Israel has a grandfather from one side who came from Europe, and a grandfather from the other side who comes from Africa or from Asia. You have to understand, I have nine grandchildren and I must say that, two of them are from Yemenite origin from their mother's side. Two of them are from Iraqi origin from their fathers' side. Some of them are Moroccan from their fathers' side. And we are not really the best family you can find in Israel, so we also have Ashkenazim, as you call, but no one is perfect you know. So for example my grandchild is asking me all the time, "Grandpa, where are we from?" And I say, you are from Israel. You are from Israel, because my family, the Rivlin family, is seventh generation not only in Israel, but also Jerusalem.

And I am trying now because I know, that we are living in Israel, and the community of Israel is built out of four, actually tribes. What the president of Israel has to do is to let them understand, that we are four tribes all together in one state, and not that the tribes are something which is different from the state, that they don't belong to the state, that they belong to the tribe. And to do it is to build bridges, to make connections, to try to explain to them that first of all, we are all Israelis.

And I mean, four tribes are the Ultra-Orthodox, are the Israeli Arabs -- Israeli Palestinians, yes in Israel we have 20% now Israeli Palestinians, all of them really -- all of them really are part of Israel, part of the environment of Israel, every one of them is voting in the elections, every one of them is part of the political life. And really the job of the president of Israel is to build bridges, to let them understand that we have to understand one each other, to meet one each other, in spite of the differences because of the change of tradition, not that we don't have similarities in our tradition, in our behavior in our language sometimes. But we have to understand is that we are all together here, and that we are the same, and that we have really to find a way in order to be all together once we are talking about the academy, employment, education, and everything else, all fields of life.

So it is quite a difficult job to fulfil the job of the president, but as I have said before first and foremost is to understand, as a president, that in spite of being a president, you are first of all should be one of the people. And I am trying to do my best to do so.

Robert Satloff: So one of the people. You've spoken and you've just started speaking about the four tribes: Secular, National Religious, Ultra-Orthodox, and Arab - with no majorities anymore. You recently gave a speech in which you said, "The country is splitting like the Red Sea," especially because of the coronavirus. Is the situation getting worse, or do you see it actually, hopefully getting better?

Reuven Rivlin: We see sometimes that the tradition, and the behavior of the communities, four of them, first of all, the Orthodox, the ultra-Orthodox, they go to shul [synagogue] three times a day. They are praying to God, three times a day, they are pleading to God to help them, or to be successful, or whatever. We have the Muslims. The Muslims are going to the mosque five times a day. We have the National Religious. Everyone has his own tradition or behavior. But I must say that I am quite optimistic, because 75% of the population knows that we have to cooperate, knows that in order to keep me safe, my health, I

have to keep other peoples' health. It is quite complicated to let the Ultra-Orthodox, that in every house they have almost, at least more than 10 children, it is quite difficult to live in an apartment less than 70 meters, and not to go to school. Sometimes it is even more dangerous for the children when they are all together, closed, in a closure. So there are different traditions.

It is very difficult to tell them, and to order them to change their traditions. But I must say that more and more, we see, really, cooperation between all the people that are meeting all day in the hospitals, or in the offices, or in, everywhere in the buses, in the trains. They understand that keeping the mask on keeps you far away from any kind of danger to your very health. So it is, it is coming, we are really progressing very much in understanding one each other, saying that some of our traditions can affect the other people, and we have to behave, and we have to take into consideration, that we have to keep their health as much as we are keeping our health.

And that is very, very complicated. It is very, very complicated for the government. It is very complicated for the police that have the job to carry on law and order and sometimes ordinances are not being kept. It is very, very difficult to say to a Jew not to go to the synagogue, to say to a Muslim you cannot go into the mosque, and when they are so used to it and they really believe that with God's help they can really overcome everything that could endanger their very health. But I must say that more than 75%, according to the polls that we are looking into, are cooperating and doing because they understand that we are all together, and that something could affect other people and affect us at the end of the day. So it is very complicated.

But of course we have more, much more, problems when we are talking about the four tribes. First of all, the four tribes have to understand that the tribes that are not something that replaces the country, that replaces the state. The State of Israel is above the tribes. When they will understand that, we will come in to real understanding.

Robert Satloff: So let me ask you about this issue of, where the State of Israel is today. There is angst, anxiety among Jews among friends of Israel in America, and Israel and around the world, on the resilience of shall we say the Jewish democracy, the institutions of the State of Israel. The perception of integrity in government, and the judiciary, and the institutions that matter. In your view, from where you sit is this issue moving in the right direction? How serious is this problem? And would you think that this issue is being addressed appropriately?

Reuven Rivlin: First of all I would like to say, that democracy is democracy. If a Jewish democracy, when you are talking about, and you are looking to our elders at the beginning of the First Century, the Talmud rabbis, the Talmud teachers, the Talmud philosophers. They were, they had a lot of differences of opinion to say the least, and what the decision was to be was the decision of the majority.

We are saying, there is a phrase in Hebrew, that people are learning from generation to generation, that the words of Beit Shammai, and Beit Hillel, and everyone who knows the idea of Judaism and the philosophers of Judaism, the people who have created the tradition as an outcome of the Ten Commandments and the Bible, were saying that the words of Beit Shammai and that the words of Beit Hillel are the words of God. Nevertheless, the rule is like Beit Hillel.

And I was asking my father -- who was a professor in the university, but really a *talmid chacham*, really one who understood Judaism, and was almost fulfilling 613 *mitzvot* [religious obligations] -- "How come, Daddy, how come, tell me, I am only 14 years old, tell me, how come both of them are the words of God,

and nevertheless you say that the rule is according to Beit Hillel?" And he said to me, "You know why Beit Hillel had the majority all of the time? Because they were speaking to Beit Shammai, they were trying to understand what Beit Shammai is saying to them. They really wanted to understand – sometimes they were convinced, and sometimes they rejected and gave really answers to the way of thinking of Beit Shammai. Because they heard what the other side has to say, and they respect the idea that maybe that they are saying something which could convince them, and so they were elected to be the people who are ruling, who are getting the power of the majority of the Jewish people during that time."

But you have to understand, we in Israel have democracy, nevertheless over the last 73 years, we didn't manage to really frame a constitution. You know Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, when the Knesset was formed, and was brought to Jerusalem, he and all the founders of the State of Israel – and I was the speaker of the Israeli Knesset – really thought that we need a constitution to be arranged within six months. And he had defined, he named the law committee to be the Law and Constitution Committee, ordering them that in six months they have to bring a constitution for the State of Israel. Nevertheless, of course, they did not manage to get, also because prime ministers of all generations didn't want too much a constitution, because in order to change the constitution you have to need 80 members of the Knesset, two thirds, and if you can use only a majority, it's much more easier for every prime minister of Israel. So I can blame also all the prime ministers of Israel during all the years from Ben-Gurion till Bibi Netanyahu, passing Peres and Rabin and all the others.

Why? Why we couldn't manage to also get a constitution? Because they were saying, the leaders of Israel: We need the support of the minorities. Because constitution without the idea that the constitution is protecting the minorities, what do we need a constitution for? And the minorities in Israel, which were two minorities, the Ultra-Orthodox and the Israeli Arabs, rejected the idea that the constitution of Israel, that the headline would be that Israel is the Jewish state, and a democratic one.

Israel is a Jewish democratic state. Not less Jewish, and not less democracy. We even said that no one, even of the 120 members of the Knesset, the whole Knesset, cannot change the nature of Israel as a Jewish state, and cannot change the nature of Israel as a democracy.

So the Arabs were asking us, "Well, if you mean that Israel is a democracy, why should it be defined as a Jewish state, it should be defined as a state of all its citizens?" And the Ultra-Orthodox were asking us, "If you are saying that Israel is a democracy, okay we agree, we have no complaints about being a democracy. But we are wondering what is the meaning of a Jewish state? Is the Jewish state, a Jewish state like the Reforms, like the Conservatives or the like the seculars?"

And because of that, till now, no one is demanding a constitution in Israel very firm. Only the Democracy Institute in Israel are pleading all the time. And I must say that even the High Court of Israel is really believing it is better to let them interpret the laws of Israel instead of having a constitution as long as we don't have the majority of 80 to change even one letter in the constitution.

So we are living in a real, I wouldn't say mess of course because we are continuing. And I can assure everyone that Israel is a Jewish state, because the people of Israel, the Jewish people of Israel have no other place to build their nationalism, their nationalistic way of feelings. This is after 2,000 years the first place, the land, the state for the Jewish people. But on the same way of thinking, we are national, but we are liberal, and we cannot think about living in our state if God forbid it will not be a democracy, a full democracy. So I can assure all people that Israel is a Jewish democratic state. A democratic Jewish state. A Jewish democratic state in one word, in one word.

Robert Satloff: One way that you showed how democratic you are, is that you had to supervise three elections in one year. That's a lot of democracy.

Reuven Rivlin: We are a little bit exaggerating I must say, but you can see when you don't have a majority. We have one sovereign. We have nothing to really hesitate about that. The sovereign of Israel is not the president of Israel – he is not even supervising the election, we have a committee, headed by the High Court judge – not the prime minister. Not the president of the High Court. The sovereign of Israel is the people of Israel. And when the sovereign decides not to decide, we have to really suffer the consequences. So sometimes you could say we are exaggerating, I would say you are absolutely right.

I really believe, that the people of Israel have to decide because to rule the country is not a privilege of one who has won the election, for who was elected, it is the duty of the leader that was elected to become the leader of the people, to lead the people. And unfortunately, the coalition, and the many, many agendas that we have in front of us bring us to believe that Israel can live and continue to live without the necessity to create a real stable government.

I did everything in order to bring to a coalition, I am not saying nothing in favor of the coalition or against a coalition, but they managed to create a government, but they have to understand that when you are making a government you have to cooperate. A coalition means to cooperate, and unfortunately everyone is accusing the other side that he is not cooperating. Of course as the president of Israel, I am not going to interfere. But the problem is of course the lack of a constitution, and because the constitution could give us the answers of what would happen if something like what is happening to us, could occur once again.

Robert Satloff: Do you expect a fourth election pretty soon?

Reuven Rivlin: Remember, I know as every citizen in Israel that it is possible. I'm not expecting anything. I am expecting the people of Israel and the Knesset to get into the understanding. We have a war just now against corona. I spoke to the president of the Palestinian people, President Abbas, and told him you see when the corona or when somebody out there decides that he can in danger all of us, there are no borders. We have to take it into consideration we have to fight it together, we have to come together and unfortunately the problem with the region, probably you will ask me about it afterwards, is the lack of confidence that we have one in each other. Because without confidence we cannot get to any kind of agreements and understanding and covenant, and the way to bring to an end the tragedy that we are living in by signing a real, real piece, that will bring us all to live together.

Robert Satloff: So let me ask you about Israel and the world for a minute. In case you haven't heard we had an election here in America too. President Trump hasn't quite conceded, but it certainly looks as though Vice President Joe Biden won our election, and will be a new president in January. So let's take a moment: Do you have a message for President-elect Biden, other than please come and visit us in Israel?

Reuven Rivlin: First of all I've already invited every elected president to come to Israel, because we are not Republicans and we are not Democrats we have one friend, the American people, bipartisan. We know that the friendship between the Americans and the Israelis goes beyond or, goes beyond politics.

Everyone who will be elected or was elected to become the president we would like him to hear us, because we know that first of all he not only respects us because of our values, and our way of thinking,

and our behavior, but also because we know we have a real strategic partnership in many, many fields that we have to take care in the world.

We are all together, so for us, for us, many people in Israel respected President Trump, because he did a lot for the people of Israel. For example, there is a consensus by 80% of the population in Israel that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. Many, many presidents have said Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. President Trump has declared and moved the Embassy of the United States will be in Jerusalem. People in Israel appreciate that very much, without any standing once you are talking about Democrats or Republicans.

But of course all the people of Israel know very much that President-elect Biden, and I am saying president-elect because everyone in America tells me from all over the television that he is the president elect, I am a very good friend of President Biden, I remember him as vice president, he was many times in Israel, I met him as the speaker of the Israeli parliament, of the Israeli Knesset, I met him as the president of Israel, and hosted him as the vice president of the United States.

And we are looking forward, we know that from time to time we have some differences of opinion, also with the American administration about the actual understanding what is the meaning of two states for two people for example, that I don't want to go into details, I really believe as a Jerusalemite, that my colleague, the president of the Palestinian people, we are both as we say in Arabic "*bani el balad*" which means all children of the same town, of the same city.

And we have to find a way in order to understand: We are not doomed to live together, it is our destiny, we are destined to live together. And when they will understand that, because Rob, we have peace with the Egyptians for more than 40 years, we have peace with the Jordanians for the last 27 years. We have peace with the king, we have peace with the president, we have peace with the administrations, sometimes we have peace with the armies when it is needed to uphold the security of the whole region. But we don't have peace between the people, and as long as we don't have peace between the people, it is really something that cannot bring us to real peace, to real understanding, because we can say two states for two people, one state for all the people, federation, confederation, we can do a lot – but first of all we have to build confidence.

I tried to say so to many, many American presidents. I was talking to Obama at the time, I was talking to Bush at the time. Clinton are very good friends of my family. And of course I met Obama, and we had a lot of discussions. We did not agree about everything, but we agreed that we need to find the way in order to build confidence. I tried even to really, to convince President Trump that confidence, building confidence, you cannot get it by making a deal. You have to have confidence with somebody. He understood, he wanted to learn more, but we have no one [who] understands it in the region.

We have, the Palestinians have to understand that it's not too bad to live with us. I'm not patronizing the Palestinians, I really believe that you cannot build confidence by patronizing anyone. I really believe that to build confidence, you have to show the people, the other people that you respect them, that you really want to live with them. And they see what we have done in the last 72 years, and probably there are times that they are thinking, maybe they wasted too much time, and that they could save, in talking to us, in building confidence with us.

We are seeking, we are eager for peace, because all people who came from all around the world to, back to their homeland, all the Jewish people who came, really came in order to find, once and for all, a safe

haven, and a place to live, and a place that we know that we can protect ourselves. But we don't have to protect ourselves if no one will reject the very idea of the State of Israel.