

Shimon Peres Was Israel's Quintessential Zionist

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Shimon Peres will be memorialized everywhere as being one of the world's elder statesman. Yet the term elder conveys a sense of distance, perhaps suggesting someone who dwells on the past.

Nothing could be further from the truth about Peres. He was defined by his endless vitality. He might be the oldest person in the room, but his very alert mind and boundless energy ensured he was endlessly vibrant. Peres embodied the maxim Abraham Lincoln coined at his second inaugural when he told his fellow citizens it was time to "think anew and act anew." Moreover, Peres was famously focused on the future. His critics will claim he was even futuristic. Peres, however, was relentlessly intent on securing Zionism in the present to ensure a better future for his people and for the region.

I remember how, as president of Israel, he basked in the love of the Israeli people, as he finally emerged as a father figure, no longer immersed in the politics of the moment that were so contentious and intense. When I visited him at Beit HaNasi a few years ago when he was president, he said to me, "I found the love of my people." When I asked him why he thought it eluded him till now, he insisted this was because for his entire life he was too busy with matters of state. "I travelled to Washington a lot, always trying to help Israel's situation," he told me. In this way he was a true disciple of Ben-Gurion, who always wanted Israel aligned with the world's leading power. Ben-Gurion studied law in Turkey during the Ottoman period. When British power ebbed during World War II, he detected early on an ascendant US. Peres was proud of his ability to detect trends early.

Peres did not just keep his eyes on Washington. While Israelis saw Peres as perhaps the most accommodating of Israel's leaders in dealing with the Arab world, the truth is that many bruising battles took place behind the scenes. One was with Egypt's then foreign minister, Amr Mousa, in the Nineties. Mousa saw Peres's effort for regional economic development not as something that could be a powerful positive force for both Egypt, Israel and the region, but rather as a move that could marginalize Cairo by a calculating Israel. Peres was attacked both by Israelis and

Arabs for his call for a "new Middle East." At one point, Peres told me he erupted at Mousa. Peres put things in a historic context as he thundered, "you did us a favor with the Arab boycott in the past, as it forced us to orient our trade to be more with the west. Israel will manage now either way."

I will never forget standing with Peres once at a Jerusalem hotel as a bride in her wedding dress passed on her way to the wedding hall where the wedding was about to commence. She started arguing with him about Oslo. Peres calmly wished her Mazel Tov on the wedding, but also explained why he felt Israel needed to pursue coexistence with the Palestinians.

I will also not forget what it was like when he would come to the annual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. Other leaders would meet a few counterparts. Peres would meet many dozens. It was interesting that all wanted to meet him, but he felt he needed to leave no stone unturned in meeting them. Like Rabin, he saw Israel's moral authority to lead people into battle as being tied to first doing everything possible in the pursuit of peace.

The thread that runs through all the above stories is Peres's adherence to an enduring tenet that has always been central Zionist. The key to Zionism, as he saw it, was not waiting for others to determine the nation's future. Zionism was about Jews seeking to shape their sovereign future and not be shaped by it.

In the early days of the state, it meant building Israel's defense apparatus, including Dimona. It also meant shaping alliances with world powers, first France and then the US. His pursuit of peace with the Palestinians was also driven by his desire for Israel to retain its dual character at the core of Zionism as a democracy and nation state of the Jewish people. Shimon Peres was Israel's Jean Monnet, the European who sought to use economic forces to bring together old enemies. As such, he sought to impact the Middle East for the better. Historians will endlessly debate his achievements, but it can already be said that he was Israel's quintessential Zionist.

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[Times of Israel \(http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/peres-always-active-was-israels-quintessential-zionist/\)](http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/peres-always-active-was-israels-quintessential-zionist/)

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