

Why I Still Miss Yitzhak Rabin

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

As a journalist, I covered Yitzhak Rabin for the better part of eight years, from 1987 to 1995. During that period, I interviewed him when he was defense minister and in the political opposition, and I covered him when he was prime minister of Israel, during the zenith of the peace process.

Fifteen years ago, on Nov. 4, 1995, Rabin was gunned down by Yigal Amir, a right-wing extremist Jew, as he was leaving a mass rally in Tel Aviv in support of the Oslo Accords. I will never forget where I was when I heard the news of his assassination. While every Israeli was glued to their television and engulfed by grief, I drove through the Israel's deserted streets, from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, in the middle of the night to the Defense Ministry as the cabinet convened an emergency session to secure the transition of power.

Rabin had extraordinary faith in the people of Israel, even when it led to a fatal misjudgment. I remember attending a tiny cabinet briefing the Sunday before the assassination. It would be Rabin's last. One cabinet minister and Rabin confidant, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who had recently been the target of an assault by right-wing extremists himself, begged the prime minister to wear a bullet proof vest while attending the upcoming peace rally.

Ben-Eliezer would subsequently recall a similar Cabinet meeting a few weeks earlier. "I came and pounded on the Cabinet table and warned that a murder could take place," he said. "They silenced me and Rabin came to me, hugged me and told me, 'A Jew that would murder a Jewish minister? That's impossible!'"

Tens of thousands of Israelis commemorated this year's anniversary of Rabin's assassination in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square on Oct. 30, where Israeli President Shimon Peres exhorted the crowd to sustain Rabin's legacy. "We are more determined than the enemies of peace, and therefore we will win," Peres said. "Because we vowed to bring an end to war, for us and our neighbors."

Reporters always loved to cover Rabin: His shyness was masked by his gruff demeanor -- chain-smoking and blunt-speaking -- and he was incapable of telling a lie. He would begin answering a question by saying, "Well, I don't want to get into this, but...." I once counted 15 separate news stories that resulted from a relaxed session with journalists, of the kind that Rabin favored when he traveled.

The Middle East has too often been defined by leaders who think that toughness is saying hard things only to the other side. In no small measure, Rabin's greatness lay in his ability to deliver tough truths to his own people. He spoke directly to his public about the need to change national priorities in order to avoid radicalization and achieve peace with Israel's neighbors.

He also challenged Israelis not to take self-pitying comfort in international isolation. He sought to reshape a culture that too often was content with *iyeh b'seder* -- "It will be OK."

Rabin was also an avid student of the Middle East. Part of his success in bonding with Jordan's King Hussein came from their visceral understandings that, given the rising wave of radicalism throughout the region, fellow moderates needed to navigate difficult challenges together. He was a master at identifying regional trends and determining their meaning -- long before they became apparent to many other members of Israel's political class.

For example, in the aftermath of the Cold War and 1991 Gulf War, Rabin immediately realized that tectonic shifts presented a remarkable opportunity for Israel. Like nobody else, he cut through the classic diplomatic conundrum: "If you are weak, you cannot afford to compromise and if you are strong, there is no need for compromise." He understood that it was in Israel's best interest to reach peace with the Palestinians at the peak of Israel's power, which had then been facilitated by regional and international change.

Rabin was willing to take bold steps to achieve peace, but his view of Israel's neighbors was unsentimental -- he knew that there would be no second chances if Israel could not defend itself. This unblinkered view led him to sign the Oslo Accords, which he believed was the best way to preserve Israel's national interests.

His leadership was rooted not just in the boldness of his thought and action, but in his personal history of military leadership. The Israeli public trusted him. As a young commander in the Palmach, the military wing of the Jewish community prior to the creation of the Israeli state, he was horrified that untrained Holocaust survivors were sent into combat during the 1948 war, only to be killed shortly after arriving in the country. This incident led him to decide to devote his life to the military.

The public appreciated his recognition that Israel did not exist in a vacuum, and had to make its way in a rough region while being true to the Zionist dream of restoring an ancient homeland. His views reflected the pragmatic strain of Zionism that is associated with David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, and Chaim Weizmann, its first president.

Rabin's credibility as a leader derived from his moral authority. He was deeply aware that the source of this authority came from ensuring that he did not leave any stone unturned in the quest of peace. He once told me that it was his genuine pursuit of an enduring peace that gave him the inner strength needed to look in the eyes of mothers who lost their sons in battle.

If he were still alive, Rabin would undoubtedly feel embarrassed today as others routinely depict him as a legend. Like anyone else, he made mistakes. When Israel was convulsed in terrorism during the First Intifada in the early 1990s, he mistakenly thought that Yasser Arafat would be better able to fight terrorism without the constraints of democratic governance. His response to his boisterous right-wing Israeli critics, who accused him of being a traitor for his willingness to cede territory in the West Bank and Gaza, was sometimes acerbic. In private settings, he sometimes questioned the security credentials of his critics, pointedly asking others what military rank, if any, these critics held in the 1967 War, when he served as Israel Defense Forces chief of staff.

Yet Rabin's mistakes pale in comparison to his courage of conviction and commitment. I will always remember my last exchange with him shortly before his death. The interview was held at the prime minister's office in Jerusalem and, in those days, demonstrators were allowed so close to the office that I could not always hear Rabin's replies.

After the interview ended and the tape recorder had been turned off, I told him that I hoped he was not despondent about the demonstrators. Speaking off-the-record, I said to him: "I hope you will not give up as the challenges are so great." He said, "They will have to carry me out of here. I will not give up."

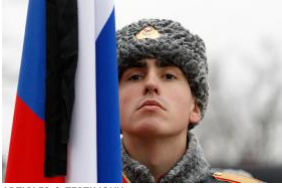
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