

## Remembering Shimon Peres, z"l

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This week's Torah reading is called *Chayyei Sarah*, which means, "Sarah's life," an ironic title for a portion that begins with our first matriarch's death. We learn nothing about Sarah's life from this portion, unless we examine a midrash taught by our ancient sages and amplified by the great medieval commentator, Rashi, who points to the way that the Hebrew announces that Sarah lived 127 years: literally, "a hundred years, and twenty years, and seven years." The rabbinic interpretation is that "Sarah was as sinless at 100 as she had been at twenty and as beautiful at twenty as she had been at seven."

Tonight, we examine the life of Shimon Peres, of blessed memory, who died at the age of 93 on September 28. Peres was as future-oriented in his nineties as he had been in his seventies, when he negotiated the Oslo Accords. He was as strategic in his seventies as he had been in his forties, when he hammered out the first significant arms deal with the United States to build Israel into the military powerhouse that it is today. He was as brilliant in his forties as he had been in his twenties, when Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, selected him as his protégé and personal secretary.

Peres was born in Poland, in an area that is now part of Belarus, in 1923, and made *aliyah* with his family at eleven. Like many Jewish youths in the *yishuv*, the Jewish settlement of Palestine under the British Mandate, Peres joined a youth movement affiliated with a political party – in his case *Mapai*, the heart of what would become the Labor Party. There, Ben-Gurion noticed Peres and brought him into his inner circle.

Five years ago this month, I was privileged to participate in a private audience with Peres, who was Israel's President at the time. I was in Israel as part of an economic development mission led by Julian Castro, then Mayor of San Antonio and now Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. Of the 25 in the group, only about a half dozen of us were invited to Israel's "White House" with the President and the Mayor. Peres shared political lessons learned from Ben-Gurion in his youth: "In politics, never lie. Always dare."

Peres would take those lessons with him into public service that included posts in twelve cabinets across seven decades, twice as Prime Minister, and twice

as Acting Prime Minister, most memorably after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, z”l.

Prime Minister and President – the latter being Israel’s largely-ceremonial head of state, a role that Peres expanded – were technically the highest offices Peres held. His most profound impact on Israel and the world, though, came from the times when he was most daring, while always telling the truth, in leadership roles at the Defense Ministry from the 1950s to the 1970s and as Foreign Minister in the 1990s.

Peres was not only the youngest person ever to serve as Director-General of the Defense Ministry, when called to that post at age 29, he was also an unconventional choice. Unlike Defense Ministry leaders before and after him, Shimon Peres was no war hero. During the War of Independence, rather than fighting on the front lines, Peres was behind a desk, in charge of arms and personnel. That experience would prove invaluable.

Peres recognized that Israel would need first-class armaments, and even a nuclear deterrent, in order to secure its long-term survival in a precarious region. He purchased French Mirage fighter jets. He negotiated with President Kennedy to acquire Israel’s first American armaments. He envisioned, and brought to reality, Israel’s unfortunately necessary and supposedly secret nuclear weapons facility at Dimona. He worked with the British and French to forge an alliance that brought Israel victory at the Suez Canal in 1956, and was awarded France’s Legion of Honor, unimaginable for an Israeli leader today. In 1976, as Defense Minister under Rabin, Peres authorized the famous, heroic, and successful raid on Entebbe, freeing Israeli and other Jewish hostages hijacked to that Uganda airport by Palestinian terrorists.

Telling the truth to Israelis, allies, and foes, alike, Peres dared to build the military might that would preserve the Jewish State, and to deploy it when necessary to protect Israel and its people.

Ironically, the man more responsible than any other for building Israel’s military might is best remembered as a peace-maker. Unless you’re under 35, all here will remember that magnificent 1993 autumn day on the White House lawn, when President Clinton pushed Prime Minister Rabin and PLO Chief Yasser Arafat into a handshake, as they cemented the Oslo peace accords negotiated by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

I was privileged to hear Peres speak to the Central Conference of American Rabbis, assembled in Jerusalem in the spring of 1995. The Oslo process was progressing then. Palestinian autonomy, which continues today, was established in portions of the West Bank. Not knowing what was to come – Rabin's assassination and waves of Palestinian terror, ultimately destroying Oslo – we heard the breadth of Peres's vision. The Foreign Minister dreamed of much more than the cessation of hostilities and two states for two peoples. He imagined that peace could facilitate the formation of a Middle Eastern Common Market, similar to what was then the European Common Market. Peres believed that peace would bring Israel and Arab states together to build a better economic future throughout the region, with open trade spreading Israel's prosperity throughout the Middle East.

Telling the truth about what Israel needed to receive in return for peace, Peres dared to take risks, and encouraged others to do the same, with a dream of a better future. That dream outlives him, even as peace, tragically, has not come.

Peres's "final act" on the public scene was in his role as President, a previously ceremonial position that he wielded with tremendous moral authority. Peres told the truth about divisions within Israeli society and boldly stood up for the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, whether that meant speaking out for Israel's Arab citizens or its Reform and Conservative Jews.

When I met President Peres with Mayor Castro, he was 88, still active and eager to share his vision with the visiting young mayor. Late in his ninth decade on Earth, the President was focused on the future. He talked about nanotechnologies, even as he reminisced about Ben-Gurion. He saw something of his younger self in Mayor Castro, and took the mentoring opportunity seriously. A meeting scheduled for 45 minutes stretched on for an hour and a half, entirely at Peres's initiative.

Shimon Peres dared to dream – of an Israel with a strong military, able to defend itself in hostile territory.

Shimon Peres dared to dream – of peace that would bring prosperity to the entire Middle East.

Shimon Peres dared to dream – of a booming Israeli economy, focused on technologies that will fuel the future.

Shimon Peres dared to dream – of Jews living in harmony with one another and with their fellow citizens of whatever ethnicity and religion.

Some of those dreams have become reality. Others remain dreams. Let Israel and all who love the Jewish State honor Shimon Peres's memory by telling the truth, even when it isn't pretty; and daring to dream. We must not let the daring dreams of Shimon Peres die with him. Let us dare, even now, to proclaim, *Od yavo shalom*, "peace will come, one day."

Amen.