

Rubber Man

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May 14, 2011

I COULD not restrain myself. Though I was alone in the room, I burst out laughing.

I was reading a newspaper report about the latest poll. People were asked to evaluate the nation's leaders.

It appears that the President of the State, Shimon Peres, is by far the most popular leader in Israel. 72% of those polled approve of him, only 20% disapprove. The runners-up were far behind: 60% for the Knesset speaker, Reuven Rivlin, the same for the Governor of the Bank of Israel, Stanley Fischer, and 57% for the aggressive State Comptroller, Micha Lindenstraus. The President of the Supreme Court, Dorit Beinisch, was already under the 50% approval rate: she got 49%, followed by Tzipi Livni with 48%.

The three champions of unpopularity were the three most powerful politicians in the country, the men who are shaping our future: Binyamin Netanyahu (38% approve, 53% disapprove), Avigdor Lieberman (40% approve, 52% disapprove) and Ehud Barak (30% approve, 63% disapprove!)

So why did I laugh?

HISTORY HAS a lot of humor. It is easier to imagine it directed by the willful and spiteful gods of Mount Olympus than by the austere god of the Jews, who resides above the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Humor has never been his strong point.

Yet here is Shimon Peres, the most popular person in Israel. How absolutely hilarious! Because in all his long life (he is two weeks older than I) he has never won an election. (Knesset members are not elected personally, but as members of a party list.)

He has been a politician since the age of 20 and has never been anything else. In a democratic country, the business of a politician is to get elected and then reelected. Yet Peres never was. In dozens of election campaigns – Knesset elections and party primary elections – he has never won. (He has never won a majority in an election as party leader, and failed to be elected in other cases where he was standing as an individual candidate.) The voters just could not bring themselves to vote for him.

(He once flung a rhetorical question at a party audience: “Am I a loser?” The reply was a thunderous: “Y E S !”)

Even his present job he got by a fluke. The President of the State is elected by the Knesset in secret ballot. When Peres ran for president the first time, the Knesset rejected him, preferring a mediocre, run-of-the-mill party hack called Moshe Katzav. That was the ultimate humiliation. Only when Katzav was uncovered as a serial women-molester and had to resign, was Peres elected by a remorseful Knesset. The members seem to have said to themselves: enough is enough. We can't go on torturing this man, who has – after all – been a member of the Knesset for some 45 years.

And now this man – whom almost everybody loved to hate – has become the most beloved leader in the country, as well as a

respected Elder Statesman throughout the world. Weird.

I MET him for the first time in 1953. I was the owner/editor of a popular news magazine, he was the newly appointed Director General of the Ministry of Defense, an immensely powerful position because the minister was David Ben-Gurion. Peres became his main assistant.

He had invited me to a meeting about some trivial matter. It was not a case of love at first sight. As a matter of fact, we disliked each other from the first moment.

There was not just a lack of chemistry. There was a very concrete reason why many people of my - and his - age-group detested him: he did not serve in the army in the 1948 war. That was almost incredible: when the fighting broke out, all of us had rushed to the colors, our entire generation was ravished by the war, I myself was seriously wounded. Yet here was a young man who had missed these momentous events.

To be fair, Peres did not idle during the war. Ben-Gurion sent him abroad to procure arms, which we needed desperately. But that could have been done by an older person, rather than an able-bodied young man of 25. It was a stigma that clung to him for decades, as long as the war generation was setting the tone in our new state. It helps to explain, by the way, why he lost out several times to Yitzhak Rabin, an authentic combat commander, loved and respected by almost everybody.

Yet, though there were always good reasons for not liking him, it seems that the aversion to him was basically irrational. He himself once complained that as a boy, when he was coming home from (Jewish) school in his Polish home town, the other (Jewish) boys used to beat him up for no reason at all, and his younger brother had to rush to his defense. “Why do they hate me?” he queried his mother plaintively.

Fortunately, his parents took him to Palestine in the 1930s, when he was 13 years old (I came a bit earlier). He was sent to a famous Zionist youth village, married the daughter of the local carpenter and was just settling down in a kibbutz, when he discovered a higher calling.

IN THE early 1940s, there was a split in Mapai, the almighty ruling party in the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine). The dissidents founded a new party, more socialist, more kibbutz-oriented and more “activist” in national affairs. Naturally, most young people were drawn to it.

That was Peres' first great chance. He was one of the very few young people who remained true to the old party, and thus attracted the attention of the party bosses, Ben-Gurion and Levy Eshkol. That was the end of Peres the kibbutznik and the beginning of Peres the life-long politician.

He did what he did later many times in his life. He “plowed” the country, visited all the local chapters of the youth movement, made speech after speech. His indefatigable diligence made up for the lack of natural charm. His deep voice gave his

most banal platitudes the ring of profound truth.

WHAT WERE his innermost convictions? What did he believe in?

Well, that depends on the year, the day and the hour. Throughout his political life, Peres has held all possible views, shedding them without a backward glance and adopting others. He is the perfect example of Groucho Marx's famous dictum: "These are my principles. If you don't like them, I have others, too."

When I first met him, he was a raving hawk. He and Moshe Dayan were pushing Ben-Gurion – and were being pushed by him – towards war by "warming up" the borders with "retaliation raids". He boasts of being the architect of the then French-Israeli alliance.

France was fighting a dirty war to keep Algeria in its grip and needed Israel to divert the Egyptian leader, Gamal Abd-al-Nasser. Peres willingly served this noble cause and prepared the French-Israeli-British collusion that led to their attack on Egypt. The 1956 Suez war was a disaster for Israel, because it finally consolidated in Arab eyes Israel's position as an ally of the hated colonialist powers. In return, France presented Peres with a handsome gift: the nuclear reactor in Dimona. Even now, Peres considers this his finest achievement.

At the time, Peres announced that the alliance between France and Israel was not based on sordid interests, but on profound common values. Like so many of Peres' immortal statements, this one took less than ten years to be to lose its luster: Charles de Gaulle gave up Algeria, France sought to re-establish its position in the Arab world, relations with Israel were unceremoniously thrown overboard, together with those "profound common values".

AS MINISTER of Defense in the mid-1970s, Peres was the father of the settlements in the central West Bank. He used the settlers to undermine his arch-enemy, Rabin, then his Prime Minister, who objected on principle to the setting up of settlements in the occupied territories.

Next, Peres suddenly emerged as the Man of Peace. Not with the Palestinian people, God forbid, but with King Hussein of Jordan. As Foreign Minister in the coalition cabinet of Yitzhak Shamir, he negotiated a secret agreement with His Majesty, but was immediately overruled by Shamir, who would not dream of making peace with anyone. So that was that.

At that time Peres realized that peace, as an abstract idea, was good for him. He became the prophet of "the New Middle East", endlessly talking about it, doing nothing for it. When

Yasser Arafat initiated what became the Oslo Agreement, Peres embraced it enthusiastically and claimed sole authorship. He even invited me to a private meeting in which he lectured me with the zeal of a convert on the merits of the Two State Solution (which I have publicly advocated since 1949).

The practical test came when Rabin was assassinated and Peres took over. For the first time, he was free to act and turn Oslo immediately into a real peace agreement. Instead, he started a war in Lebanon which came to a quick and disastrous end when the artillery caused - by mistake - a massacre in Qana. Then he approved the assassination of an important Hamas leader, setting in motion a series of bloody suicide bombings in all major Israeli towns. So Peres lost the elections (again) and Netanyahu came to power.

That was not the end. Ariel Sharon broke away from Likud and founded the Kadima party. After losing his bid for the chairmanship of the Labor Party, Peres left them and joined Kadima. As the inventor of The New Middle East he gave Sharon, the sworn enemy of Palestinian independence, a kosher certificate and played a major role in getting the world to accept him. Now he is performing the same service for Netanyahu, using his position as President and Elder Statesman to convince the world's governments that Netanyahu is at heart a Man of Peace and given time – much, much time – he will yet "surprise the world".

AS PRESIDENT of the state, Peres talks endlessly, as he has always done. Yet in all his uncounted millions of words, I have yet to detect a single original idea.

That is by itself a curious state of affairs. Like Ben-Gurion, whom he seeks to imitate, he presents himself as a profound thinker, an intellectual who reads all the important books. One of his former aides claims that he never really reads a book, but has his assistants prepare resumes of their contents, so he can talk about them knowingly. I judge by his style – a person who reads poetry and literature is bound to reflect some of this in his speeches and writing. Peres' products are uniformly shallow, his Hebrew trite and superficial. No wonder that he is now the most popular leader in Israel.

The man who has advocated everything, war and peace, socialism and capitalism, secularism and religion, and whose principles are so elastic that they can embrace anything and everybody – at long last he has achieved, on the State of Israel's 63th anniversary, what he has been searching for all his life:

People love him.