

Sisyphus Redeemed

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IF THERE IS a God, he surely has a sense of humor. The career of Shimon Peres, who is about to finish his term as President of Israel, is clear evidence.

Here is a life-long politician, who has never won an election. Here is the world-renowned Man of Peace, who has started several wars and never done anything for peace. Here is the most popular political figure in Israel who for most of his life was hated and despised.

Once, several decades ago, I wrote an article about him with the title “Mr. Sisyphus”. Sisyphus, it will be remembered, was condemned for all eternity to roll a heavy rock to the top of a hill, and each time when he was nearing his goal the stone slipped from his hands and rolled down again.

That has been the story of Peres’ life—until now. God, or whoever, has obviously decided: enough is enough.

IT STARTED when he was a boy in a small Polish town. Many times he complained to his mother that the other pupils in the (Jewish) school were beating him up for no reason. His younger brother, Gigi, had to defend him.

He arrived in Palestine in 1934, a year after me, as a boy of 11 (he is five weeks older than I). His father sent him to the agricultural school in Ben Shemen, a children’s village that was a Zionist indoctrination center. There the Polish Persky became the Hebrew Peres and joined the Noar Oved (“working youth”), the main youth organization of the ruling Mapai party. As was usual then, he was sent to a kibbutz.

That’s where his political career started. Mapai split into two, and so did its youth movement. The young and active joined “Faction 2”, the left-wing section. Peres, by now an instructor, was among the few who wisely remained with Mapai, and thus attracted the attention of the party leaders.

The reward came soon. The 1948 war broke out. Everybody in our age group hastened to join the fighting forces in what appeared to be literally a fight for life or death. Peres was sent abroad by Ben-Gurion to buy arms. An important task, no doubt, but one that could have been done by a 70-year old.

The fact that Peres did not serve in the army at this fateful juncture was not forgotten and earned him the contempt of our generation for decades.

I MET him for the first time when we were 30—he was already the Director General of the Ministry of Defense and the darling of Ben-Gurion, I was the editor in chief of a popular opposition magazine. It was not a case of love at first sight.

In his powerful position, young Peres was a determined war-monger. During the early 50s, his ministry ordered an unending chain of “retaliation actions” whose aim was to keep the country on a war footing. Arab refugees who returned at night to their villages were killed, Jews were killed in return, and unofficial units of the army crossed the armistice lines to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to kill civilians and soldiers in turn.

When the atmosphere was ripe, Ben Gurion and Peres started the 1956 Suez war. The Algerian people rose up against their French colonial masters. Unable to admit that they were facing a genuine war of liberation, the French blamed the young Egyptian leader, Gamal Abd-al-Nasser. In collusion with another declining colonial power, Great Britain, the French conspired with Israel to attack Nasser. It ended in a mess, but Peres and Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan were celebrated in Israel as heroes, the men of the future.

The French showed their gratitude. For his services, Peres received a military atomic reactor in Dimona. Peres still boasts of being the father of Israel’s nuclear armament.

HIS CAREER was clearly heading for the top. Ben-Gurion appointed him Deputy Minister, and he was destined to become Minister of Defense, the second most powerful position in Israel, when disaster struck. The querulous Old Man quarreled with his party and was thrown out. Peres followed. The rock rolled down to the bottom.

Ben-Gurion insisted on founding a new party, and dragged an unwilling Peres after him. With indefatigable energy, Peres “plowed” the country, went from village to village and from town to town, and the “Rafi” party took shape. Yet with all its array of celebrities, it won only ten Knesset seats. (The peace party I founded at the same time got a seventh of their number of votes.)

As a member of a small opposition party, Peres was vegetating. The future seemed dark, when Nasser came to the rescue. He sent his army into Sinai, war fever reached a frenzied pitch and the public decided that Ben-Gurion’s successor, Levy Eshkol, must give up his position as Minister of Defense. Several names were mentioned. High on the list was Peres.

And then it happened again. Moshe Dayan snatched the prize and became the Defense Minister, victor of the 1967 war and a world-wide hero. Peres remained a gray politician, a minor minister. The rock was down again.

For six glorious years, Dayan was the captain of the Ship of Fools, until the disaster of the Yom Kippur war. He and Golda Meir were wiped from the table and the country needed a new Prime Minister. Peres was the obvious candidate. But at the very last moment, practically out of nowhere, Yitzhak Rabin appeared and walked off with the prize. Peres had to satisfy himself with the Ministry of Defense.

He didn’t. For the next three years, he devoted days and nights to an unceasing effort to undermine Rabin. The fight became notorious, and Rabin invented a title which stuck to Peres for many years: “tireless intriguer”.

However, the effort bore fruit. Near the end of his term, Rabin faced a scandal: it appeared that after leaving office as ambassador to the USA, he had left open a bank account in Washington DC, contrary to Israeli law. He resigned in the mid-

dle of the 1977 election campaign, Peres took over. At long last, the way was open.

And then the incredible happened. After 44 consecutive years in power, before and after the founding of Israel, the Labor Party lost the election. Menachem Begin came to power. Responsibility fell on the party leader, Shimon Peres. Nobody blamed Rabin.

ON THE eve of the 1982 Lebanon war, Peres and Rabin went to see Prime Minister Begin and urged him to attack. This did not prevent Peres, two months later, appearing as the main speaker at the giant protest demonstration after the Sabra and Shatila massacre.

Begin abdicated and Yitzhak Shamir took his place. In the following election Peres at least achieved a draw. Shamir became prime minister again for two years, to be followed by Peres. During his two years as Prime Minister, he did nothing for peace. His main act was to persuade President Chaim Herzog to amnesty the chief of the Security Service and a group of his men who admitted to having murdered with their bare hands two young Arab prisoners who had hijacked a bus.

In 1992 it was Rabin again who led their party to power. He appointed Peres to the Foreign Ministry, presumably because he could not harm him there. However, things took another direction.

Yasser Arafat, with whom I had been in contact since 1974 and whom I met in besieged Beirut in 1982, decided to make peace with Israel. Behind the scenes, contact was established in Oslo. The result was the historic Oslo agreement.

Between Peres, his assistant Yossi Beilin and Rabin a competition for the credit started. Peres tried to appropriate all of it for himself. Beilin angrily resisted. But it was, of course, Rabin who took the fateful decision and paid the price.

First there was the Battle for the Nobel. The Oslo committee decided of course to bestow it on Arafat and Rabin (as it had done before to Sadat and Begin). Peres furiously demanded a share and mobilized half the political world. But if Peres got it, why not Mahmoud Abbas, who had signed together with him, and who had worked for years for Palestinian-Israeli peace?

Nothing doing. The price can go only to three people at most. Peres got it, Abbas did not.

THE OSLO agreement opened a new road for Israel. Peres started to talk (endlessly) about the New Middle East, and adopted it as his personal trade mark. He and Rabin had patched things up between them. And then disaster struck again.

A few minutes after standing next to Peres and singing a peace song at a mass demonstration in Tel Aviv, Rabin was assassinated. Peres himself had passed the murderer with his cocked pistol, who would not flatter him with a bullet.

That was the dramatic high point of Peres, and of Israel. The entire country was seething with anger. If Peres, the sole successor, had proclaimed immediate elections, he would have won by a landslide. The future of Israel would have been different.

But Peres did not want to win as the heir to Rabin. He desired to win on his own merits. So he postponed the elections, started another war in Lebanon which ended in disaster, caused another deadly terror campaign by ordering the assassination of a beloved Hamas leader—and lost the elections.

In a variation of Murphy's law: *"If an election can be lost, Peres will lose it. If an election cannot be lost, Peres will lose it anyhow."*

On a memorable occasion, Peres addressed a party meeting and loudly posed the rhetorical question: *"Am I a looser?"* The entire audience roared in return: *"Yes!"*

THAT SHOULD have been the end of Sisyphus' troubles. New people took over the Labor Party. Peres was pushed aside. Or so it seemed.

Ariel Sharon, the extreme right-wing Likud leader, came to power. Throughout the world he was considered a war criminal, the author of several atrocities, blamed by an Israeli commission as "indirectly responsible" for the Sabra and Shatila massacre, the man behind the fateful settlement project. He needed someone to make him acceptable. And who did? Shimon Peres, the internationally renowned Man of Peace. Later, he did the same for Netanyahu.

But his rock rolled down a final time. The Knesset had to elect a President of Israel. Peres was the obvious candidate, opposed only by a political nobody, Moshe Katzav. Yet the impossible happened: Peres lost, although he had undergone an operation that changed his lifelong hangdog expression into something more likeable.

Even people who didn't like Peres agreed that this was just too much. Katzav was accused of rape and sent to prison. Peres finally, finally, won an election.

SINCE THEN, tragedy has turned into farce. The man who had been abused all his life suddenly became the most popular person in Israel. As President he could talk every day, letting loose with an endless stream of utter banalities. The public just lapped it up.

Throughout the world, Peres became one of the Grand Old Men, one of the Wise Elders, the Man of Peace, the symbol of all that is fine and good in Israel.

His successor has already been elected. A very nice person of the very extreme Right.

In a few weeks, Peres will finally step down.

Finally? Why, he is only 90!