

The Saga of Sisyphus

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SHIMON PERES IS a genius. A genius of impersonation.

All his life he has worked on his public persona. The image replaced the man. Almost all the articles written about him since he fell ill are about the imagined person, not the real one.

As the Americans like to say: He is so phony he is real.

ON THE surface, there are some similarities between him and me.

He is just 39 days older than I. He came to this country a few months after me, when both of us were 10 years old. I was sent to Nahalal, a cooperative village. He was sent to Ben Shemen, an agricultural youth village.

It can be said that both of us are optimists, and that we have been active all our lives.

That's where the similarity ends.

I CAME from Germany, where we were an affluent family. In Palestine we lost all our money very quickly. I grew up in utmost poverty. He came from Poland. His family was affluent in Palestine, too. I retained a slight German accent, he retained a very strong Polish one.

Already in his childhood there was something that attracted the ire of his schoolmates in the Jewish school of his small native town. They often beat him up. His younger brother used to defend him. "Why do they hate me so?" Shimon asked him, he recounted.

In Ben Shemen his name was still Persky. One of his teachers suggested he adopt a Hebrew name, as almost all of us did. He proposed Ben Amotz, the name of the prophet Isaiah but this name was snapped up by another pupil, Dan Tehilimsager, who also became famous. So the teacher suggested Peres, the name of a large bird.

WE FIRST met when we were 30. He was already the Director General of the Ministry of Defense, I was the Editor-in-Chief of a magazine that upset the country.

He invited me to the ministry in order to ask me not to publish an investigative article (on the sinking of an illegal refugees' ship in the harbor of Haifa by the Haganah before the founding of Israel). Our meeting was a story of mutual dislike on first sight.

My dislike was already primed before the meeting. In the war of 1948 ("the War of Independence") I was a mem-

ber of a commando unit called "Samson's foxes". All of us, the combat soldiers of that war, detested members of our age-group who did not enlist. Peres did not enlist, he was sent abroad by David Ben-Gurion to buy arms. An important job—but one that could be fulfilled by a 60-year old.

This fact hovered over Peres' head for a very long time. It explains why members of his age-group detested him and loved Yitzhak Rabin, Yigal Alon and their comrades.

SHIMON PERES has been a politician from childhood on—a real politician, a complete politician, a politician and nothing else. No other interests, no hobbies.

It started already in Ben Shemen. Peres was an "outside boy" there, a new immigrant who was different from all the sun-burned, athletic native boys. His not very pleasant face did not help. Yet he attracted Sonia, the carpenter's daughter, who became his wife.

He craved the love of his mates and wanted to be accepted as one of them. He joined the "Working Youth", the youth organization of the almighty Histadruth trade union and became very active. Since the local boys, nicknamed Sabras, did not like political activity, Peres rose in their ranks and quickly became an instructor.

His first opportunity came after he finished his studies in Ben Shemen and joined a kibbutz of the Labor party (Mapai), which ruled the Jewish community with an iron fist. The party split, almost all youth leaders joined "Faction B", the opposition group. Peres was almost alone in remaining true to the majority faction. Thus he drew the attention of the party supervisor, Levy Eshkol.

It was a brilliant political exercise. His erstwhile comrades despised him, but he was now in touch with the top party leadership. Eshkol brought him to the attention of Ben-Gurion, and when the 1948 war broke out, the leader sent him to the US to buy arms.

Since then Peres acted as Ben Gurion's right-hand man, admired him and—most important—became his political successor.

BEN-GURION IMPRINTED his political outlook on the new state, and it may be said that the state continues today to move on the rails laid by him. Peres was one of his principal helpers.

Ben-Gurion did not believe in peace. His views were

based on the assumption that the Arabs would not ever make peace with the Jewish state, which was founded on what had been their country. There would not be peace for, at least, a long long time. Therefore the new state needed a strong, Western power as an ally. Logic dictated that such an ally could come only from the ranks of the imperialist powers, who were afraid of Arab nationalism.

It was a vicious circle: In order to defend itself from the Arabs, Israel needed a colonialist anti-Arab ally. Such an alliance would only increase the Arabs' hatred towards Israel. And so forth, to this very day.

The first prospective ally was Britain. But this came to nought: the British preferred to embrace Arab nationalism. But at the right moment another ally appeared on the scene: France.

The French had an extended empire in Africa. Algeria, officially a department of France, rebelled in 1954. Both sides fought with utmost savagery.

Unable to believe that their Algerians would rise against them, the French cast all the blame on the new leader who had come to power in Cairo. But no country was ready to assist them in their "dirty war". Except one.

Ben-Gurion, who was already aging, was afraid of the new pan-Arab leader, Gamal Abd-al-Nasser. Young, energetic, good-looking, and charismatic, "Nasser", a rousing orator, was unlike the old Arab notables Ben-Gurion was used to. So when the French stretched out their hand to him, Ben-Gurion eagerly grabbed it.

It was the old vicious circle again: Israel supported French oppression against the Arabs, Arab hatred towards Israel increased, Israel needed the colonial oppressors even more. In vain I warned against this catastrophic process.

Ben-Gurion's emissary to France was Shimon Peres. With his help, the process reached undreamt heights. For example: when the UN debated a proposal to improve the prison conditions of the Algerian leader, Ahmed Ben Bella, the only voice in the UN which voted against was Israel's. (The French themselves boycotted the meeting.)

This unholy alliance reached its climax in the 1956 Suez war, in which France, Britain and Israel jointly attacked Egypt. This operation aroused unified worldwide condemnation, the US and Soviet Russia made common cause and the three conspirators had to withdraw. Israel had to give back the huge territory it had occupied.

The French recalled Charles de Gaulle to power, and he understood that he had to put an end to the senseless war. Peres continued to laud the alliance which, he announced, was not based on mere interests but on profound common values. I published this speech, sentence by sentence, with my rebuttal to each. I forecast that once the Algerian war was over, France would drop Israel like a hot coal and renew its ties with the Arab world. And that, of course, is exactly what happened. (Israel adopted the US instead.)

One of the fruits of the Suez adventure was the atomic reactor in Dimona. Legend has it that it was given to Israel as a gift by France in gratitude for Peres' services. In reality it was a part of France's deal with Israel, as well as a boost to French industry. Necessary ingredients were obtained in many places by theft and deceit.

Peres was praised in Israel to high heaven. It was praise for a man of war, not peace.

THE CAREER of Peres resembles the legend of Sisyphus, the hero of ancient Greek myth who was condemned by the gods to roll a heavy rock up to the top of a hill, but every time he approached his goal the rock would slip from his hands and roll down to the bottom.

After the Sinai war, Peres' fortunes rose to new heights. The architect of relations with France, the man who had obtained the atomic reactor, was appointed Deputy Minister of Defense and was on his way to become an important member of the cabinet, when everything crashed down. Ben-Gurion insisted on disclosing an odious sabotage affair in Egypt and was deposed by his colleagues. He insisted on founding a new party, called Rafi. Peres, much to his own displeasure, was compelled to join, as, with equal displeasure, did Moshe Dayan.

Ben-Gurion was not active, Dayan did nothing, as usual, and it fell to Peres to campaign. With his usual untiring energy he ploughed the land, but in the elections the party, with all its brilliant stars, won only 10 seats in the 120-member Knesset, and went into impotent opposition. The rock of Peres rolled down to the bottom.

And then came redemption—almost. Abd-al-Nasser sent his army into Sinai, in Israel panic broke out. The Rafi party joined the government. Peres expected to be appointed Minister of Defense, but at the last moment the charismatic Dayan got the desired job. Israel won a resounding victory in six days, and The Man With The Black Eye-patch became a world celebrity. Poor Peres had to make do with a minor ministry. The rock was down again.

For six years Peres languished, while Dayan sunned himself in the admiration of the world's men, and especially women. And then luck changed again. The Egyptians crossed the Suez canal and gained an incredible initial victory, Dayan crumbled like an earthen idol. After some time both Golda Meir and Dayan were compelled to resign, Peres was the obvious candidate for prime minister.

But the incredible happened again. Out of nowhere there appeared Yitzhak Rabin, the native boy, the victor of the Six-day war. He was chosen Prime Minister, but was compelled to appoint Peres, whom he did not like, as Minister of Defense. The rock was half way up again.

The following years were hell for Rabin. The Defense Minister had only one ambition in life: to humiliate and undermine the Prime Minister. It was a full-time job,

To spite Rabin, Peres did something of historic sig-

nificance: he created the first Israeli settlements in the middle of the occupied West Bank, starting a process that now threatens Israel's future. The furious Rabin gave him a moniker that has stuck to him since: “The Tireless Intriguer”.

A few years later Rabin had to call early elections, because fighter planes obtained from the US arrived in Israel on Friday, too late for the guests of honor to get home without desecrating the Shabbat. The religious factions rebelled. Rabin, of course, headed the party list.

Then something happened. It appeared that after leaving the job of ambassador to the US, Rabin had left behind him in America a bank account—something that was forbidden at the time. Rabin's wife was accused, Rabin took the blame on himself and resigned, Peres became No. 1 on the list and at long last the rock neared the top of the hill.

On the evening of election day Peres was already celebrating victory, when the wheel abruptly turned during the night. Incredibly, Menachem Begin, considered by many a fascist had won. Down went the rock.

On the eve of the 1982 Lebanon war (during which I met with Yasser Arafat) opposition leaders Peres and Rabin went to see Begin and called on him to invade Lebanon.

Then Begin fell ill with Alzheimer and was succeeded by another former terrorist, Yitzhak Shamir. A kind of interregnum followed, when neither of the two major parties could rule alone. A two-headed rotation-scheme evolved. On one of his stints as Prime Minister, Peres gained undisputed laurels as the man who vanquished Israel's three-digit inflation and instituted the New Shekel, still our currency.

The rock went up again, when something very nasty happened. Four Arab boys kidnapped a bus full of people and drove it south. The bus was stormed. The government asserted that all four were killed during the battle, but then I published a photo showing two of them alive after capture. It appeared that they had been executed in cold blood by the Security Service.

In the middle of the affair Peres succeeded Shamir, as agreed in advance. Peres procured a pardon for all the murderers, including the chief of the Shin Bet.

RABIN RETURNED to power, with Peres as Foreign Minister. One day, Peres asked to see me—an unusual event, since the enmity between us was already a part of folklore.

Peres lectured me on the necessity to make peace with the PLO. Since this had been my main aim in life for many

years, I could hardly refrain from laughing. He then told me in confidence about the Oslo negotiations, and asked me to use my influence to convince Rabin.

Peres certainly had a part in the agreement, but it was Rabin who made the momentous decision—and paid with his life.

In my imagination, I see the assassin waiting at the foot of the stairs with his loaded pistol, letting Peres pass a few inches away and waiting for Rabin, who came down a few minutes later.

The Nobel Prize committee decided to award the Peace Prize to Arafat and Rabin. Peres' admirers around the world raised hell, until the committee added Peres to the list. Justice demanded awarding the prize also to Mahmoud Abbas, who had signed with Peres. But the statutes allow only for three laureates. So Abbas did not become a Nobel laureate, too.

After Rabin's death, Peres became temporary Prime Minister. If he had called immediate elections, he would have won by a landslide. But Peres did not want to ride on the dead man's coattails. He waited for a few months, during which he conducted an ill-advised war in Lebanon. In the end he lost the elections to Binyamin Netanyahu.¹

In all the election campaigns, Peres was cursed and abused. Once he complained about “a sea of (obscene) Oriental gestures”, which made him even more disliked by citizens of Oriental descent.

During this time Peres did something wise: he underwent plastic surgery. His looks improved remarkably.

The final disgrace came when Peres stood for election to the presidency of the state. The President, a ceremonial figure bereft of real power, is elected by the Knesset. Yet Peres lost to a nonentity, a Likud party hack named Moshe Katzav. It seemed a final insult.

But then again the incredible happened. Moshe Katzav was arrested and convicted of rape. In the following election, the Knesset elected Peres in what looked like an attack of collective remorse.

The rock had reached the top of the hill. With his untiring energy, Sisyphus has won after all. The life-long politician who had never won an election was now President—and overnight he became very popular.

Peres had several years to enjoy the new love of the people, his lifelong aim. And then, two weeks ago, he had a stroke and fell into a coma.

I hope he recovers. They don't make 'em like that anymore.

¹ Giving rise to my joke: “If an election can be lost, Peres will lose it. If an election cannot be lost, Peres will lose it anyway.”