

The Siamese Twins

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AFTER COMMENTING ON most of the episodes on the first Israeli Prime Ministers in Raviv Drucker's TV series "The Captains", I must come back to the one whose episode I have not yet covered: Yitzhak Rabin.

Let me state right from the beginning: I liked the man.

He was a man after my own heart: honest, logical, straightforward, to the point.

No nonsense, no small talk. You entered his room, he poured you a straight whisky (seemed to me he detested water), got you seated, and asked a question that compelled you to come straight to the point.

How refreshing, compared to other politicians. But Rabin was no real politician. He was a military man through and through. He was also the man who could have changed the history of Israel.

That is why he was murdered.

The salient fact of his life was that, at the age of 70, he completely changed his basic outlook.

He was not born a man of peace. Far from it.

He was as orthodox a Zionist as they come. He fought Israel's wars, justified and unjustified, without asking questions. Some of his actions were brutal, some very brutal. During the first intifada in the Gaza Strip, he said "break their bones", and some soldiers took this literally.

So how did this man come to recognize the Palestinian people (whose very identity was denied), negotiate with the Palestinian "terrorist" leadership and sign the Oslo agreement?

I have the singular luck of being, perhaps, the only person in the world who has heard from the two main protagonists of the Oslo drama how they reached that turning point in their lives—and the lives of their two nations. They told me themselves (on different occasions, of course).

Rabin's account went more or less like this: After the 1967 war, I believed in the Jordanian Option, as did almost everybody else. Since nobody believed at the time that we would be allowed to keep the occupied territories, we wanted to return them to King Hussein, provided he let us keep East Jerusalem.

One day, the King announced that he was washing

his hands of the West Bank. So the Option died. One of our experts advocated setting up "Village Leagues" in the West Bank and negotiating with them. The leagues soon collapsed.

In 1993 an Israeli-Arab peace conference was convened in Madrid. Since Israel did not recognize the Palestinians, the Palestinian representatives from the occupied territories were included in the Jordanian delegation. But when the discussion reached the Palestinian issue, the Jordanians got up and left the room, leaving the Israelis face to face with the Palestinians.

Every evening the Palestinians told the Israelis: now we must call Tunis and get instructions from Yasser Arafat. This was ridiculous. So, when I became Prime Minister again, I decided that we had better talk with Arafat himself.¹

IN HIS chapter about Rabin, Drucker paints a picture that—I believe—was not accurate.

According to him, Rabin was a weak person, who almost had to be dragged to Oslo by Shimon Peres, then the Foreign Minister. As an eyewitness, I must testify that this is quite wrong.

I met Rabin for the first time at the swimming pool. I was chatting with Ezer Weizmann, the commander of the Air Force, who had angered Ben-Gurion with his highly offensive jokes. Rabin appeared, clad like us in a bathing suit. He ignored me and turned straight to Ezer: "Don't you have enough troubles already without speaking in public with Uri Avnery?"

The next time I met him was in 1969, when he was ambassador in Washington. We had a long talk, in which I argued that the only way to safeguard the future of Israel was to make peace with the Palestinian people under the leadership of Arafat. Rabin was completely opposed to this opinion.

From then on, we met many times. A friend of mine, the sculptress Ilana Goor, was obsessed with the idea of getting us to talk with each other. So she threw frequent parties at her studio in Jaffa, the real purpose of which was to get us together. We generally met at the bar, and after everybody else had gone home we sat and talked, often

¹Arafat's story was similar: We started the armed struggle. It did not defeat Israel. Then we got the Arab armies to attack. At the start of the October War the Arabs indeed gained a brilliant victory, but they lost the war nevertheless. I realized that we could not defeat Israel, so I decided to make peace with Israel.

with Ariel Sharon. What about? The Palestinian question, of course.

When I started my secret talks with the delegates of Arafat, first with Said Hamami and later with Issam Sartawi, I went to see Rabin in the Prime Minister's office and told him about it. Rabin's response was typical: "I don't agree with you, but I don't forbid your meetings. And if you hear something that you believe the Prime Minister of Israel should know about, my door is open."

After that I brought him several messages from Arafat, all of which he ignored. They concerned minor initiatives, but Rabin said: "If we start down this road, it will inevitably lead to a Palestinian state, which I don't want."

Arafat obviously wanted to establish contact with Rabin. I believe that this was Arafat's main purpose when he first received me in besieged West Beirut. (I was the first Israeli he ever met.)

I wish I could say that I honestly believe that it was I who convinced Rabin to change his outlook completely and make a deal with the Palestinians, but I do not believe it. Rabin was convinced by Rabin, by his own logic.

Rabin's historic mistake was that, after achieving the breakthrough in Oslo, he did not rush ahead and make peace. He was too slow and cautious. I have often compared him to a general who has broken through the enemy lines, and instead of throwing all his forces into the breach, hesitates and stops. That cost him his life.

This was a recurring fault. On the eve of the 6-day war, when he was Chief of Staff, the prolonged wait—or his compulsive smoking—caused him a breakdown. He was immobilized for 24 hours at the climax of the tension, during which time his deputy, Ezer Weizmann, took over command.

This did not prevent Rabin from achieving the historic victory in the war, under the best General Staff the Israeli army ever had. It had been put together by Rabin patiently for the time of need.

Years later, when Rabin was chosen Prime Minister, Ezer publicly warned the public that Rabin was not up to the job. In a memorable scene, Ariel Sharon shut himself in a public phone booth, with a heap of tokens in front of him, and phoned every newspaper editor in the country to assure them that Rabin was fit for the job.

I believe that in his plodding way, Rabin would even-

tually have made peace with the Palestinian people and helped to set up a Palestinian state. His initial dislike of Arafat gave way to mutual respect. Arafat visited him secretly at his home.

THE MAIN subject in Drucker's film was the proverbial enmity between Rabin and Peres. They hated each other's guts, but could not get rid of each other. I likened them to Siamese twins who hated each other.

It started right from the beginning. Rabin gave up his higher studies (agriculture) in order to join the Palmach, the field force of our underground army. When the '48 war broke out, he became a field commander.

Peres did not join the army at all. Ben-Gurion sent him abroad to buy arms. That was surely an important task—but it could have been accomplished by a 60-year-old. Peres was 24—two weeks older than I.

Since then, all my generation hated him. The stigma never left him. That was one reason for the fact that Peres never won an election in all his life. But he was a master of intrigue. Rabin, who had a sharp tongue, famously called him "the untiring intriguer".

At the end, the outstanding bone of contention was the Oslo breakthrough. Peres, as Foreign Minister, claimed the credit.

One day I had a weird experience. I received a call that Peres wanted to see me. Since we were sworn enemies, that was strange. When I arrived, Peres gave me an hour's concentrated lecture on why it was important to make peace with the Palestinians. Since this has been the central theme of my life for many decades, while he had always adamantly opposed it, this was rather surrealistic. I listened and wondered what it was all about.

Soon after, when the Oslo agreement became public, I understood the scene: it was part of Peres' effort to claim the credit.

But it was Rabin, the Prime Minister, who made the decision and took the responsibility. Because of this he was murdered.

The final scene: the assassin stood at the foot of the stairs, the pistol in his hand, waiting for Rabin to come down. But first came Peres.

The murderer let him pass unharmed—the ultimate insult.