

# The Triumph of Sisyphus

Uri Avnery

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**D**AVID BEN-GURION WAS not buried in the Great of the Nation portion of the national cemetery in Jerusalem, but next to his wife's grave in Sde Boker, the Negev settlement he loved.

Shimon Peres, his pupil and follower, was not buried next to his wife's grave in Ben Shemen, the place she loved. But in the Great of the Nation plot.

That's all the difference.

I DID not take part in the hullabaloo that accompanied the funeral. All in all, it was quite ridiculous. Everybody who had once shaken his hand or exchanged a few words with him felt obliged to write about him at length, expressing his profound insights. Most of it was sheer nonsense.

I enjoy appearing on TV. But this time I refused dozens of invitations from TV, the radio and whatnot. I just did not want to join the chorus.

Apart from anything else, there was also the paradox: the hundreds of eulogists, including the dozens who came from abroad, spoke in order to praise the Man of Peace, but the entire event was a propaganda triumph for the Netanyahu government, the government of occupation.

THE DELUGE of articles about the deceased reminded me of the ancient Greek story about a bunch of blind men, who came across an elephant. "The elephant is like a pipe" reported one, who was holding the trunk. "The elephant is hard and sharp", said the one holding the tusks. "It is like a rug", said the one holding the ear flaps", and so on.

Shimon Peres had many facets. Only all of them together make the real man, who was not seen by any of the eulogists. Almost all they said and wrote was rubbish.

All of them ignored the real elephant standing in the middle of the room: the occupation.

WHEN HE was felled by the stroke, I wrote an article. I have decided now to publish it anew, with several additions I feel are important, or, at least, interesting. I am sorry if it is a bit long.

Shimon Peres was a genius. A poseur of genius.

All his life he worked on his public persona. The image replaced the man. Almost all the eulogies were about the imagined person, not the real one. The real man was buried, may his soul rest in peace. The imagined man will

be remembered for generations to come.

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

He was 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.

What we had in common was optimism and continuous activity.

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 abject poverty. He came from Poland. His family was affluent in Palestine, too. I retained a German accent, he retained a very strong Polish one. Most people thought it was a Yiddish one, but he denied this vehemently. At the time, the Yiddish language was despised and detested in the country.

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

This was perhaps the origin of his lifelong craving for the love of people, for their admiration and adoration.

In Ben Shemen his name was still Persky. One of his teachers suggested he adopt a Hebrew name, as almost all of us did in those days. 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 of prey. Another story has it that Shimon saw a vulture on a trip in the Negev and adopted its name.

WE FIRST met when we were 30. He was already the Director General of the Ministry of Defense, I was the publisher and 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. He did not like me. I very much did

not like him.

My dislike was already primed before the meeting. In the war of 1948 ("the War of Independence") I was a member of a commando unit. All of the combat soldiers of that war detested members of our age-group who did not serve and lived it up, while our comrades fell all around us.

One of those who did not serve was Shimon Peres. 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 our age-group detested him and loved Yitzhak Rabin, Yigal Alon and their comrades. Haim Hefer, the poet of the elite Palmach unit, wrote a song about him: "How did the bedbug get so high?"

SHIMON PERES was 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 unattractive face and strong accent did not help. Yet he attracted Sonia, the daughter of the teacher of carpentry, who became his wife.

He craved with all his heart to be considered "one of the gang". So he joined the "Working Youth", the youth organization of the almighty Histadruth trade union and became active with all the enormous energy he already had. Since the local boys, nicknamed Sabras, did not like political activity, Peres rose in the 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, and so did the youth organization. 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 leaders, and especially Levy Eshkol.

It was a brilliant political tactic. 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—followed his path.

In the hullabaloo of eulogies Peres was called "the last of the founders of Israel". This is complete nonsense. The state was founded by the soldiers of 1948, the killed, the wounded and their comrades. Not in some office in Tel Aviv, but on the battlefields of Negba and Latrun. Ben-Gurion and the politicians shaped the state, and not for the better. Peres was only a junior assistant.

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, many generations to come, if at all. 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 the rising Arab nationalism.

It was a vicious circle: (1) In order to defend itself from the Arabs, Israel needed a colonialist anti-Arab ally. (2) Such an alliance would only increase the Arabs' hatred towards Israel. (3) And so forth, to this very day.

The first prospective ally was Britain, the mother of the "Balfour declaration". But this came to naught: the British preferred to embrace the new 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: Israel.

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

It was the old vicious circle again: (1) Israel supported French oppression against the Arabs, (2) Arab hatred towards Israel increased, (3) Israel needed the colonial oppressors even more.

In vain I warned against this fateful process. When Abd-al-Nasser came to power, he indicated a willingness to talk with Israel. He invited a friend of mine a high-ranking former army officer he had met during the 1948 war, for a secret visit to Cairo. Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett forbade him to go. I believe that a historic opportunity was lost. Israel did the opposite.

Ben-Gurion's emissary to France was Shimon Peres. The young man, who spoke bad French and wore an ill-fitting blue suit, became a familiar face in Paris. With his help, the process reached undreamt of heights. For example: when the UN debated a proposal to improve the

prison conditions of the captive 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 collusion, 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 all the large Sinai peninsula.

At that time, I set up the "Israeli Council for a free Algeria". I met with members of the "provisional Algerian government", who wanted us to convince the Algerian Jews to remain in their homeland after independence.

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

Before France left Algeria, the French settlers there set up an underground movement, the OAS, against the freedom fighters and against de Gaulle. At the time, a ship full of arms was discovered on the high sea. It was found that the ship was on its way to the Algerian settlers. Everybody suspected Peres. Foreign Minister Golda Meir, who hated Peres anyhow, was furious. At the time, the Defense Ministry of Peres delivered arms to many of the dirtiest dictatorships on earth.

One of the fruits of the Suez adventure was the atomic reactor in Dimona. In Israel, an indelible legend has taken hold that Peres is the "father of the bomb". In reality, the reactor was a part of France's prize for the invaluable service Israel had rendered France during the Suez war. It was also a boost for French industry. Necessary materials were obtained in many places by theft and deceit.

All in all, Israel was harmed by its involvement with France. The rift between it and the Arab world turned into an abyss.<sup>1</sup>

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 boulder up to the top of a hill, but every time he approached his goal the boulder 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 was bent 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 ruled their lives.

Ben-Gurion was not active. Dayan, as usual, did nothing. It fell to Peres to campaign. With his usual untiring energy he plowed 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 emergency 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.

Rafi rejoined the Labor party. When I met Peres in the Knesset, I asked him how he felt. "I'll answer with a joke," he answered. "A man marries and his colleagues ask him about his wife. It's a question of taste, the man answers, she is not my taste."

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. On Yom Kippur the Egyptians crossed the Suez canal and gained an astounding initial victory, Dayan crumbled like an earthen idol. After some time both Golda Meir and Dayan were compelled to resign.

Who was to succeed Golda as Prime Minister? Peres was the obvious candidate. He was not involved in the mistakes that had led up to the war. He was a defense expert. He was young and promising. The boulder neared the top of the hill, when the incredible happened again.

Out of nowhere there appeared Yitzhak Rabin, the native boy, the victor of the Six-day war. He snatched the crown from right under the nose of Peres. 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 undermine the Prime Minister. It became his full-time occupation.

The animosity between the two, which started in the 1948 war, turned into full-fledged hatred. Rabin enjoyed all Peres' failures. For example: as minister of defense, Peres was responsible for the occupied territories. One day he ordered elections for the municipalities, being sure that

<sup>1</sup>Unlike most of my friends in the Israeli peace camp, I did not come out against Israel's nuclear armament. The bomb could give Israelis a sense of security that could have served as a roof for the peace effort. I never attacked Peres for his part in this matter.

harmless old notables would be elected. Instead, the Palestinians chose young pro-PLO activists. When I chanced to visit Rabin the next day, he was celebrating.

Mainly to spite Rabin, Peres did something of historic significance: he created the first Israeli settlements in the middle of the occupied West Bank, starting a process that now threatens Israel's future. Until then, settlements were put up only on the fringes of the West Bank. No wonder that the settlers sung his praises at the funeral.

It did not happen by accident. Already on the morrow of the occupation, when I called for the immediate setting up of a Palestinian state, Peres was close to a new organization called "All of Eretz-Israel", which advocated the annexation of all the occupied territories by Israel.

The furious Rabin gave him a moniker that has stuck to him since: "The Tireless Intriguer".

In 1976 it was decided to undertake a very dangerous operation at the Entebbe airfield in Uganda, in order to liberate hijack hostages including a number of Israelis. When it succeeded, a fight started in Israel about the laurels. Peres claimed the success for himself, since the daring plans were worked out in his ministry. Rabin's admirers insisted that he had made the decision and taken upon himself the responsibility.

This, by the way, throws light on one important fact: Peres always functioned best when he was No. 2. He was No. 2 to Ben-Gurion in the French affair. He was No. 2 to Rabin in Entebbe, and later in Oslo.

A year later Rabin had to call early elections, because fighter planes supplied by the US arrived in Israel on a 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 his job as ambassador to the US, before becoming Prime Minister, Rabin had left behind him in America a bank account—something that was unlawful 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 boulder neared the top of the hill.

In the evening after election day Peres was already celebrating victory, when the incredibly happened, Menachem Begin, considered by many a fascist, had won. Down went the boulder.

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.

The war ended with the Sabra and Shatila massacre, and Begin fell into a deep depression 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 undis-

puted laurels as the man who vanquished Israel's three-digit inflation and instituted the New Shekel, still our currency.

The boulder went up again, when something very nasty happened. Four Arab boys hijacked 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, this time 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, while he had adamantly opposed it, 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 also awarding the prize to Mahmoud Abbas, who had signed the agreement with Peres. But the statutes allow only for three laureates. So Abbas did not become a Nobel laureate, too. He did not protest.

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 wanted to win on his own merits. He postponed the elections for a few months.

This was the great opportunity of his life. At long last he was Prime Minister, free to make decisions. It was a catastrophe.

First he gave orders to kill the "engineer", a celebrated Palestinian fighter ("terrorist"). As a consequence, all over the country buses were blown up. Then he invaded Lebanon, an operation which ended with the horrible (accidental) massacre in Kafr Qana.

In the ensuing election, he lost to Binyamin Netanyahu.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>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."

I NEVER hated Peres. I believe that he did not hate me. The enmity between us was purely political.

From time to time we came across each other. Once the celebrated conductor Zubin Mehta and his new wife invited my wife and me to dinner at his home. When we arrived, I was astonished to discover that except for us, only Shimon Peres and his wife, Sonia, were there. It was an interesting evening. Peres turned out to be an amusing conversationalist, full of sardonic humor. He described at length a meeting of the cabinet with Henry Kissinger, describing the behavior of the ministers one by one. One minister spent the meeting cleaning his fingernails, another ate all the time, and so on.

One of the legends he took great pains to spread was that he was an avid reader, who read all important books as they appeared. The New York Times eulogized him as the "Politician-Philosopher". Truth is he did not read books at all. One of his close assistants, Boaz Appelboim, disclosed that his job was to read the books and prepare for Peres a short summary, with the addition of a quote or two, allowing Peres to drop a knowing remark during conversations. This made a profound impression.

This is confirmed by a simple observation. When a person reads books, this is reflected some way or other in his utterances. Nothing of the sort could be detected in the innumerable speeches of Peres. All his speeches were political, flat and dry.<sup>3</sup>

One of the real talents of Peres was his capacity to coin clever phrases. There are hundreds of them, from "the New Middle East", which was devoid of any substance, to "swinish capitalism", a phrase that did not hinder him from fraternizing with the world's rich.

IN ALL his election campaigns, Peres was cursed and

abused. People threw rotten tomatoes at him. Once he complained about "a sea of (obscene) Eastern gestures"—which made him even more disliked by citizens of Eastern 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 boulder had reached the top of the hill. With his usual untiring energy, Sisyphus had won after all. The lifelong politician who had never won an election was now President—and overnight he became incredibly popular, the darling of the masses. It was truly a miracle.

He used his new-found world-wide celebrity to serve as a fig leaf for the Netanyahu government and its policy of occupation and oppression, while adored abroad as the Man of Peace.

Peres had several years to enjoy the new love of the people, his lifelong aim. And then he had a stroke.

His funeral became a first-class national and international event. Peres was crowned as one of the world's Great Men, as the ultimate Man of Peace, as a Founder of the State of Israel, as a Great Thinker. He could have been a character out of Shakespeare.

Sisyphus was buried. But the boulder remains on the top of the hill.

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<sup>3</sup>Actually, no active politician has time to read. Ben-Gurion, Peres' mentor, also pretended to be a man of the book, a Bible commentator and renewer of the Hebrew language. He told us that he had learned Spanish for the sole purpose of reading Don Quixote in the original. But Ben-Gurion, too, was a politician—a political genius, but nothing more than a politician.