

I want to go back in time 25 years ago. To a time before the internet, before smartphones or before even email.

Can you even imagine all that?

I was in college and one day, I returned to my room to find a phone message from Rabbi Sheer, the rabbi of our Hillel at Columbia University.

He needed to speak to me urgently.

When I returned the call he told me that he had good news and bad news. I always like the bad news first. Well, he continued, we had only a few weeks to plan a major event so that was the bad news. The good news – Shimon Peres, the former Prime Minister of Israel wants to speak at Columbia.

Wow!

“Oh, and David, since you’re the President of the Hillel, you get to introduce him.”

*Yafe.* Nice.

That began a series of frenetic weeks and then, when the evening finally arrived, I was able to spend a few minutes with Peres backstage. He was friendly and affable. I asked him about the chances for a peace deal with the Palestinians.

With a gleam in his eye, he told me that he thought it was possible.

At the time I did not think much of his answer – it felt like he just wanted to give a young adult a positive, hopeful message. But within a



year, the Oslo Accords were signed. Of course, he had already been working on those secret meetings in Oslo when I met him. There really was something to that gleam in his eye!



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This Shabbat we remember the amazing life of Shimon Peres – *zikhrono livrakhah*, may his memory, like his life, be a blessing and an inspiration.

His death closes a generation – he is the last of the founders of Israel, having lived until age 93, playing a vital role in every stage of Israel's history; in every decade, he was part of every major event in the life of his country.

But, he was not just a leader who was there, he was a leader who was transformative and helped shaped the entire course of a nation.

As was said at the special cabinet meeting in memoriam on Wednesday, “This is the first day of the State of Israel without Shimon Peres.”

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To truly appreciate his impact, we should go back and take a look at his life. Born on August 2, 1923, to Yitzhak and Sara Perski in Poland, he grew up in a village where Zionism was strong. Incidentally, he was a cousin of Betty Joan Perske, better known as actress Lauren Bacall.

While his father was a successful timber merchant and his mother a librarian, it was his grandfather, Rabbi Tzvi Meltzer, who had a tremendous impact on his life.

Peres once explained: "As a child, I grew up in my grandfather's home. ...I was educated by him....My grandfather taught me Talmud. It was not as easy as it sounds. My home was not an observant one."

In 1934, at age 11, he made *aliyah* with his family, immigrating to Israel, which was called Mandatory Palestine at the time, and settled in Tel Aviv. A dreamer and poet, he loved the land and at age 15, transferred to an agricultural school, lived at Kibbutz Geva and helped found Kibbutz Alumot. As a young leader he rose quickly, becoming, at age 23, one of the leaders of the Mapai political party headed by David Ben-Gurion.

All of his family that were left in his *shtetl* in Poland were murdered by the Nazis, including his grandfather, Rabbi Meltzer, who was burned alive in the town's synagogue.

Shimon hebraized Perski to Peres, married Sonya Gelman, with whom he had three children. When he joined the Haganah, he was responsible for arms purchases. During the War of Independence, he became the head of the naval service.

By the early 1950s Peres was in charge of the Defense Ministry's delegation to the U.S. where he studied at the New School, NYU, and Harvard.

As Deputy Director-General of the Ministry of Defense in the 1950s he had a monumental impact on Israel's security, helping the fledgling country obtain French fighter jets and establish the Dimona nuclear reactor.

From his first election to the Knesset in 1959 he was involved in so many aspects of Israeli history that I will simply leave it at that. Several times, he was Foreign Minister and Defense Minister among many other ministerial portfolios.

Although he was not great at winning elections, he did serve as Prime Minister three times – for a short stint in 1977, once in the mid-80s in a rotating arrangement with Yitzhak Shamir and again in 1995-96 after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, may his memory be for a blessing.

Among his greatest legacies were the Oslo Accords signed with the Palestinians, peace with Jordan, and winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994.

But his crowning achievement was serving as President of Israel – largely a ceremonial role – from 2007 to 2014. It was during those years, that many in the country, including those on the right end of the political spectrum, came to admire and appreciate him.

Peres brought hope and optimism to Israel. Sadly, although his dream of a New Middle East did not come to fruition, it was his vision that remains Israel's best hope for a better tomorrow.

Beloved in the U.S., Peres received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama in 2012 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2014 when the U.S. House of Representatives also declared that "Congress proclaims its unbreakable bond with Israel."<sup>[92]</sup>

During his presidency, Peres built a [Center for Peace](#), focused on promoting lasting peace and advancement in the Middle East by fostering tolerance, economic & technological development, innovation, cooperation & well-being. He had a great sense of humor, evident in the video he made after he retired from the Presidency at age 91 about his needing to find a new job. If you have not seen it, or even if you have, [watch it](#) again after Shabbat.



He was funny, sharing in 2007: “I’ve been controversial for most of my life. Suddenly, I’ve become popular. I don’t know when I was wrong, then or now.” ([Haaretz](#))

Even when he taught something profound, he would make you smile. As he said on CNN in 2011: “You know what our greatest lack is? It’s that we have nothing. This small piece of land is an arid land – swamp in the north, desert in the south, and no water. We have two lakes – one is dead, the other dying. We have one river – which has fame but no water. If you want to pray, you go to the Jordan River, but if you want to irrigate, go somewhere else.” (November 2011, [CNN](#))

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In *Parashat Nitzavim*, Moshe includes everyone in the covenant ceremony in the Torah reading. Moshe includes even “*Et asher einenu po imanu hayom* – even those who are not with us here this day.” (Dt. 29:14) The rabbis, as recorded in *Midrash Tanhuma* understand this to mean that even the souls of future Jews, including converts to Judaism, are included, as if they had been at Mount Sinai. Our rabbis were looking forward, making sure that future generations would be a part of this tradition.

Similarly, Shimon Peres was always forward looking – he encouraged young people to dream, as he once said: “Looking back, the only mistake we made was not dreaming big enough. Let’s dream big, let’s look ahead, and make the world a better place, a peaceful place, for all people.”

Like all thoughtful leaders, he could reflect on his actions and learn from his mistakes. He moved away from encouraging the settlements, conceding in 2003: “It took Zionism 25 years to overcome its great error –

its attempt to ignore the existence of the Palestinians in this land – and Oslo was the true and correct beginning of such a solution. More than anything else, Oslo was proof that we can live in this land another way.”

Unlike many other politicians, he was never involved in a scandal – he was able in the words of our *parashah* to choose life “*u’va’harta hayyim.*” (Dt. 30:19-20), Peres was not perfect, but neither was Moses.

After Rabin was murdered, his leadership wavered as Roger Cohen pointed out in [a NY Times article](#) this week and he made some poor choices, some of those led to his narrow defeat in the spring of 1996, losing the premiership to Bibi Netanyahu, by less than 1% of the vote. “By that narrow margin was the dream of Peres and Rabin defeated. An arid political season has ensued. And so in Peres’ death the loss feels acute.”

We are missing our wise, sagacious voice, our dreamer of peace. While he was not able to bring us to that Promised Land, he pushed us to believe that it is still possible.

*Yehi Zikhro Barukh* – may his memory be blessed and may new voices carry us to the dream of tomorrow.

