

CHOL HAMOED
SUKKOTT
OCTOBER 22, 2016
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I have always found the Book of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, to be the most cynical of Biblical books. Although Michael Fox, in his JPS commentary on the book, states: “Ecclesiastes is the closest the Bible comes to philosophy... the boldest, most radical notion of the book is not Kohelet’s contradictions, his pessimism, or his observations of injustices. It is the belief that the individual can and should proceed towards truth by using his own powers of perception and reasoning,” I am not convinced. Any book that begins with the words “Utter futility, said Kohelet, utter futility, all is futile. What real value is there for a man and the gains he makes beneath the sun? One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever,” seems rather cynical to me.

Reading those opening words of Kohelet I sense the cynicism of the individual, whoever it may be, as he looks around and sees the world with its many problems, difficult situations and complexities, for which he could not find adequate answers.

It is very easy to be cynical about the world in which we live. One only needs to look to the political realm. Or, one can look at how religion has been used and abused through violence and intimidation. Or, one can see how far we’ve advanced technologically in so many innovative ways and yet not improved the human lot. It is easy to get down on the world and the people who inhabit it, and I always found that Kohelet is of that opinion.

Thankfully, that has not been the normative opinion in Jewish history. If we had been cynical or pessimistic, we would never have survived. It would have been very easy to view the hopelessness of the Jewish situation in various eras of human history. If we had not had faith in the future, we would have quickly died out as a faith and as a nation.

A few weeks ago, the Jewish people lost its ultimate optimist. The life of Shimon Peres encompassed modern Jewish history. He was born in Poland, left as a young man to make Aliyah to Israel, and lost family in the Shoah. He was one of the pioneers in the kibbutz movement and eventually rose in the Labor Party to prominent political and leadership positions. He served as a member of the Knesset continuously for 48 years, except for one three-month period; it is the longest Knesset tenure in Israeli history. It ended in 2007 when he assumed the presidency. He served in almost every important position in the Israeli government and yet he endured defeat after defeat by the Israeli population in the electoral process. In politics he was admired by some, reviled by others. He was the individual who made Israel strong just before, during, and after its War of Independence. It was Peres who procured armaments to save the fledgling Israeli nation. It was Peres who initiated Israel’s move to becoming a nuclear power. It was Shimon Peres who was involved in the Oslo Accords and dreamed of peace. And it was Peres after many personal defeats, frustrations, and disappointments, who never gave up hope in the future. As he aged, he believed that optimism was realism and the key to the future. As he aged, he became an even greater dreamer than those who were his more youthful colleagues. As he aged, he became more respected and admired by all.

There were many written obituaries about his life and the eulogies that were delivered at his funeral extolled his unique role in Israel's history. No other Jewish leader, at this moment in history, could command the presence at his funeral the President of the United States, a member of the British Royal Family, delegations from around the world, and the President of the Palestinian Authority. The life of Shimon Peres was unique and with his passing, the founding generation of the State of Israel is now history. While there are some who never saw eye-to-eye with Peres and his point of view, I am convinced that they grew to respect him for being an individual who cared deeply about the State of Israel, the Jewish people and, indeed, all of humanity.

While Peres the politician in the Knesset had many disappointments, Peres, as the ninth president of the State of Israel, was admired by all. Even those who disagreed with him showed a great deal of respect to this elder statesman of the State of Israel. During his presidency he established an annual president's conference entitled Tomorrow. I was privileged to be present at all of them over the course of his tenure. Joining us in Jerusalem were scientists and psychologists, statesmen and politicians, royalty and show business performers. I listened to him talk about nanotechnology for well over an hour without any notes. I watched him interview Shakira, the South American pop star, who came to Israel and told Peres of her charitable work in her own country. I listened to him ask intelligent questions of neuroscientists and biologists, medical inventors, and business capitalists. His views were intelligent and his speeches right on target.

Yair Zivan, a former foreign press spokesman for Peres, wrote: "Peres believed in the power of young people to bring about change, he believed in optimism as a driving force, he believed that women weren't only equal to men but that without equality for women societies could never truly thrive. He believed in science as a force for good. But more than anything he believed in the Jewish people and he believed in the State of Israel, and he loved them both."

Peres never gave up hope for a peaceful solution to all of the conflicts in the Middle East even though that solution seems far from fruition at this particular moment in history. He had an enormous curiosity and a passion for the new and the innovative. Against all the odds in the Middle East, he was a believer in the essential good of humanity. Along with Yitzchak Rabin and Yasir Arafat he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1994. In his speech he said: "Countries used to divide the world into friends and foes. No longer. The foes are universal: poverty, famine, religious radicalization, desertification, drugs, proliferation of nuclear weapons, ecological devastation. They threaten all nations, just as science and information are the potential friends of all nations."

David Horovitz, who interviewed Peres many times, both in public and private, wrote that Peres once responded to him in this fashion: "Doubt is not a policy. Doubts are a riddle. If you want to do crossword puzzles, go ahead. You need to take positions."

Peres believed in the eternity of the Jewish people, and that the Jewish people needed to be, in Isaiah's words: "A light unto the nations." In June of 2012, I was present at a meeting of the Jewish Agency which Peres addressed. At the age of 89, he challenged all of us. I actually

used his framework for defining a Jew as a basis for my Yom Kippur sermon the following September. Since not all of you can quote it right now, I'll remind you of it. Peres told us that the first component of being a Jew is that a Jew strives to be a moral human being. For him the Ten Commandments were given not only to the Jewish people, but to all humanity, and that while being moral was not simple in this world, it was essential. The second attribute he suggested is that a Jew is always dissatisfied with the way things are. His thought was molded by the prophetic tradition as the prophets continued to hold the Jewish community of their age to the highest of standards. It is always our responsibility, he suggested, to ask questions and never be satisfied with the status quo. And finally, he said that the Jew must be a soldier for peace. As each of our prayer services conclude with the wish for peace he took that as a responsibility of each and every Jew and of the Jewish nation in its collective.

These last few years, I was present at a number of meetings with the President of the State of Israel, The Honorable Shimon Peres. In public at his conferences, in his home, the President's house in Jerusalem, and in some private meetings. As a public official, he was a moving and dynamic speaker. As a Jew he cared deeply for our tradition. At his funeral the one song that was sung was Avinu Malkenu, by Israeli musician David D'or. For his 90th birthday he made a special request that Barbara Streisand come to Israel to sing for him in his honor the same song, which she did. I was invited to the evening which honored the President, but I was only given one ticket. I decided to sit in our home in Jerusalem with Bryna and watch it on Israeli television. It was a very moving moment.

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In public he was never timid in sharing his strong opinions, in person he could be charming and playful. I saw him sit quietly eating breakfast in Israeli hotels, meeting with individuals in the lobby, and always stopping to say hello to young children.

A few years ago, I was asked to join the Conservative Movement Leadership in a visit to his presidential home. On the agenda was a discussion concerning the issue of religious pluralism. My colleagues spoke in English and asked the President to intervene on behalf of the Jewish people around the world. I told him I would speak in Hebrew and directly to the issue. He looked at me and said, "It's okay, I understand English." I did, though, speak in Hebrew just to show him that we were conversant in the language and culture of the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

We have lost a great leader and a visionary. The holiday of Sukkot is the holiday of Thanksgiving on the Jewish calendar. We are thankful for the life of Shimon Peres, his lessons, and his legacy. On this Shabbat Chol HaMoed Sukkot we don't have to listen to the cynicism of Kohelet, we can put our faith in the optimism of Shimon Peres as we work to create a brighter future for the Jewish people, the State of Israel, and all humanity.