

Interview:

Shimon Peres

By Charley J. Levine

No Israeli has been as central to Israel's struggle for survival and peace as Shimon Peres. The Labor Party leader, socialist visionary and Zionist thinker is a two-time prime minister who has also served as defense minister and foreign minister. A Nobel Peace laureate and living legend, the 80-year-old Peres discusses issues ranging from his own education to Ariel Sharon's legacy and Yasser Arafat's failures.



GPO

Q. You had little formal education. How did you earn your reputation as an intellectual, a great thinker?

A. I never stopped learning in my life. Schools can be a catastrophe. You have to make your life into a school. You don't simply go to university and then graduate and that's it. You are never graduated. All my life, no matter how busy I was I continued to learn—by books, by reading, by thinking, by learning languages. Until the age of 26, I didn't know a word of English. I didn't know a word of French. People understand that they have to eat three times a day, but they don't understand that they have to read three times a day. When you eat three times a day you become fat. When you read three times a day you become wise. Better wise than fat.

Q. How did your learning process begin?

A. After the [War of Independence], I was nominated to head our new government's international procurement efforts. I told them I wasn't ready because I was totally ignorant. On the very day I was named to head our mission in America, I registered at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. My first lesson was about the psychology of economics, and I didn't know what psychology was. I went home, took the dictionary and searched through the whole "S" section! And then I tried all the "C" pages. I didn't know anything. But after three months I started to get A's in English.

Q. Much of your public career has focused on Israel's security. How are we doing in that regard?

A. When I was concerned with security, it was not an "option." Today we have not only security but also an option for peace. We partly made peace and are still partly in danger. The art today is to get rid of the danger and make complete peace. We made peace with Egypt, we made peace with Jordan, we started to make peace with the Palestinians. We have to accomplish it, we have to understand that peace must be.

Q. Any comments on Sharon's evolving legacy?

A. Nothing is guaranteed. I think he has mishandled the recent situation. He created a government that is more of an accident than a structure. When he got rid of the religious parties he became dependent on the extremes. His coalition doesn't have the necessary balance.

Q. He didn't exactly have much leeway in the matter since your party refused to join in.

A. I don't say he planned it that way. When we started, I told him that I am older and more experienced than you, saying: "One morning you'll wake up, you'll say, 'My God, a year has passed and nothing has happened.' You'll wake up another day and say another year passed and nothing happened. The third time

you wake up you discover you don't have another year left to change anything." I told Sharon that what he won't do in the first hundred days, forget it because it's only then that you have an opening. Later the sharks return...and you'll be occupied full time with just surviving. You need bold decisions, quick decisions, precise decisions. Until now he hasn't made strategic decisions. The duration of power is unimportant. [Yitzhak] Shamir was prime minister for seven years. So what? Some people made their mark when they had been prime minister for just the first three months.

Q. Your party looks nearly dead. Am I missing something?

A. In politics a comeback is always a possibility. Sharon didn't make a comeback. Barak fell down on his own, like a stone. In the past six years we have had four changes of government. Twice Labor went up and down, and twice the Likud went up and down.

Q. Do you see a return to a coalition of the left and the right at some point?

A. The right and the left are [both] blind in a certain way. The left doesn't understand that for peace you need a majority of the people, not a good singer who sings the folk songs of peace. The right and left are fighting for the same ground basically, for the center. I joined the previous national unity government because I thought that to have a majority we needed the right during those two years. Meanwhile the right has moved toward a Palestinian state and toward the partition of the land. People say it is I who moved, but I don't feel that way.

Q. Why does Europe, which decries terrorism, have virtually no policy about countering terror?

A. They think they can charm the terrorist countries from their terror by talking to them, negotiating with them, changing them.

Q. That's rather naive, isn't it?

A. It's not naive when you don't have a strong army. Europe is for an international court, but you cannot maintain the law if you don't also have international police. So you cannot just create a high court in The Hague. Who will arrest the terrorists, who will stop them? I think that's a mistake on the part of Europe. They have to come out with a policy and readjust all the institutions in Europe.... There is a danger if NATO does not have a role to play against terror. The UN Security Council has the same problem. The United Nations cannot stop terror. Europe cannot stop terror. The only one that can stop it is the United States.

Q. One of the principles to which you dedicated yourself was socialism. Are you still committed?

A. Some people think that socialism is a dogma, or a form of economic and social behavior. I belong to those who believe socialism is...rather, a civilization, an attitude to the major problems of achieving justice, equality, solidarity, peace, change. From that point of view I'm a disciple of [David] Ben-Gurion. I believe the economy depends upon science and technology more than upon labor and material. So Marxism changed. Even China understands that it is technology that leads economy and not the materialism that historically set the course.

Q. When Arafat failed as a peacemaker, did it detract from your role since you put your faith in his ability to produce?

A. It's too simplistic a question. Arafat was a very impressive leader early on.... People who think seriously owe him credit for bringing the revolution to an end, and they have problems [seeing] him failing to make the [Palestinian] state. These are two different vocations or talents. Today he and we are in a paradoxical situation. The people around him feel that while it's hard to be with him, it's harder to be without him. He is the only leader who is fireproof. Nobody will try to kill him because of his credibility. Anyone who might replace him will be in danger. So he's there, but on the other hand he doesn't want to [take on] the necessary fight to disarm the other groups. He gives [his people] the capacity to move ahead but he doesn't give them the energy to create a unified command over the armed forces. It makes a mockery of

the Palestinian position. The solution is to deal with the people around him, knowing that they are in touch with him, trying to improve the situation.

Q. More than most people, you have earned the right to retire. Do you have plans to leave public life?

A. Why should I retire? People are spoiled these days. We were born to work and to fight and to think. I don't think that age is a sin. Experience is not a shortcoming. So as long as I feel I am able to serve the people who elected me, why not continue to do so? Some may not like it. Perhaps I can't satisfy all of them, but they don't all satisfy me either. I guess that means we're on a par.