

**Shimon Peres: A Political Life.** Schocken Books: Tel Aviv 2011. 224 pp.\*

In the opening paragraph of a new work on Ben-Gurion, we are told by the author that Israel's founding father was a visionary leader and a pragmatist. Many readers will have heard this before. But since the book is written by Shimon Peres, the president of Israel (and former prime minister, along with almost every other position in the cabinet), this is a political biography with a difference. Peres was only 24 when he first started working for Ben-Gurion. In the course of the 1950s and early 1960s, Peres was a close ally of Ben-Gurion in his capacity as the director general of Israel's Defense Ministry. Thus, on the face of it, Peres is uniquely placed to analyze his life and legacy.

Yet some will ask whether Shimon Peres needed to write this book. His reverence for Ben-Gurion is present throughout the book -- the worst he can bring himself to say about him is that he lacked a sense of humor.

Those seeking a positive appraisal of Ben-Gurion in English are already served by works such as Michael Bar-Zohar's "Ben-Gurion: A Political Biography" and Shabtai Teveth's "Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs: From Peace to War."

Peres' book, however, was written in collaboration with David Landau, former editor-in-chief of this newspaper and a contributor to The Economist, who previously worked with Peres on his 1995 memoir "Battling for Peace." It is Landau's presence ultimately that gives the book its spark. By confronting his interlocutor on the controversial episodes in Ben-Gurion's political life, Landau ensures that Peres is not able to have it all his own way. Indeed, there are

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some fascinating exchanges here between them that shed light on the difficult issues that are still troubling Israel today.

Peres sketches out in fine narrative detail the evolution of his relationship with Ben-Gurion. He suggests that the veteran Israeli leader liked him for his audacious spirit. During the 1950s, Peres, as director general of the Defense Ministry, was tasked with building the defense relationship between Israel and France, at a time when the former was facing a grave shortfall in arms. Ben-Gurion was suspicious of the French but allowed his protégé to buy arms from them. Peres played a leading role in securing French cooperation for the development of an Israeli nuclear program.

Many of Ben-Gurion's cabinet colleagues were unhappy that Peres had been promoted at such a young age (he became director general at age 29) and viewed him as a "fantasist," particularly in view of his work on the nuclear project. Ben-Gurion also involved Peres in the collusion among Britain, France and Israel which resulted in the Suez invasion of October 1956. Peres says he has been inspired by Ben-Gurion's statesmanlike qualities and far-sighted pragmatism throughout his own distinguished career, and this is reflected in much of the book. He claims that Ben-Gurion's difficult decision to accept the UN Partition Plan of 1947 is viewed as a "historic act of political wisdom whose logic is as cogent today as it was then." Similarly, Ben-Gurion was quick to see the advantages of aligning Israel to the West and forging a close relationship with the United States. Thus, we are told that it was his imaginative leadership that enabled Israel not only to survive in a sea of hostility but to thrive in the decades that followed.

There is an intriguing debate between Peres and Landau over Ben-Gurion's decision to exempt a few hundred yeshiva students from military service. In fact, Peres had been given the task of negotiating with the ultra-Orthodox on the issue. Peres concedes that the number of exemptions has grown over the years to include tens of

thousands of men who would otherwise be serving in the regular army or the reserves. Landau implies that Ben-Gurion's thinking on such issues was based on a perception that there would be a decline in the number of traditionally observant Jews. This, in turn, appeared to be based on the mistaken assumption that Orthodox Judaism was a passing aberration rooted in a "diasporic version of Judaism." Perhaps Ben-Gurion was not quite so far-sighted after all? Is it possible that his all-pervasive derision toward the Diaspora blinded him to realities? Either way, this was a costly mistake that resulted in persistent and growing antagonism between the ultra-Orthodox and the rest of the country's Jewish population.

There is also an absorbing exchange between Peres and Landau over Ben-Gurion's acceptance of the UN Partition Plan. Landau reminds us that Ben-Gurion deliberately avoided noting the partition borders in the May 1948 Declaration of Independence. The suggestion is that Ben-Gurion was hoping for an expansion of Israel's area. Peres will have none of this. He states with some justification that once the Arabs had rejected partition and were ready to wage war on the fledgling state, it was only natural that Israel would seek improved borders. He maintains that Ben-Gurion did not want to rule over the West Bank, and sought an agreement with Transjordan's King Abdullah in 1948 over the possibility of an Arab state in that territory.

Israel's founding father believed that the Palestinian identity could be expressed within an Arab state in Transjordan. However, the claim that Ben-Gurion sought a "Jordanian option" as a solution to the conflict is contradicted by Peres' admission that he opposed handing over the West Bank to King Hussein after the Six-Day War. Ben-Gurion also supported the construction of settlements in such sensitive locations as Hebron. Thus, in spite of the common belief that he counseled for an immediate evacuation of the territories after the 1967 war, there is an element of ambiguity regarding what he genuinely thought.

We find a similar ambiguity when it comes to Ben-Gurion's attitude vis-à-vis the Arabs in 1948. Peres claims that he never heard his mentor call for the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs during the War of Independence. Indeed, he asserts that the leader clearly condemned the practice. The respected "new historian" Benny Morris accepts that Ben-Gurion never gave clear orders for expulsions. He did not want to go down in history as the "great expeller," and did not wish his government to be blamed for morally dubious actions. On the other hand, Morris has presented evidence that Ben-Gurion desired as few Arabs as possible in the new Jewish state. His hope was that they would leave, something he said explicitly in meetings during the latter part of 1948. Indeed, during the battles of July 1948, Ben-Gurion approved what became the war's largest expulsions, from Lydda and Ramle.

### **Tension with Sharett**

It is disappointing that Peres does not discuss in any detail Ben-Gurion's fractious relationship with Moshe Sharett, his foreign minister. Ben-Gurion was unhappy about the prospect of Sharett succeeding him as prime minister in 1954, but no explanation is given. In fact, the two public figures had widely divergent political approaches to Israel's security predicament. Ben-Gurion was a great believer in self-reliance and was inclined to support fierce military reprisals as a means to deter future Arab attacks. He often appeared indifferent to international opinion, an attitude reflected in Ben-Gurion's famous aphorism that Israel's future did not depend on what the Gentiles said but on what the Jews did. In contrast, Sharett was cautious about the use of military force, and highly sensitive to international opinion. Ben-Gurion's approach suggests that he was not always the pragmatist that Peres likes to think he was. On occasions, he could be remarkably insular, petty and short-sighted.

This short-sightedness also affected Ben-Gurion's relationships with other political rivals, including Chaim Weizmann. Landau questions Peres over Ben-Gurion's ungenerous attitude toward Weizmann when the two served as prime minister and president, respectively. They had been at loggerheads for many years, and Israel's first premier remained cold toward Weizmann even when they were supposed to be presenting a united face. Levi Eshkol was also in Ben-Gurion's bad books. In the run-up to the 1967 war, he became so disillusioned with Eshkol, then the prime minister, that he colluded with his long-standing ideological enemy, Menachem Begin, in an attempt to move Eshkol aside. Peres intervened by recommending that Eshkol remain premier and that Moshe Dayan take on the position of defense minister. Ben-Gurion eventually agreed. This is one of the few occasions in the book where even Peres appears to accept that his mentor was extreme in his actions.

At times, Peres shifts his focus somewhat from Ben-Gurion and turns the lens on himself. In a telling aside, Peres states: "Once I was the most controversial man in Israel. Now I'm the most popular. And I don't know which is better. If you ask me, I miss times of controversy!" Maybe so, but there were times when Peres could have displayed more of Ben-Gurion's mettle and steeled himself for criticism of unpopular but important actions. Perhaps deep down, in expressing his longing for "times of controversy," Peres recognizes this.

Nowhere is this truer than in the brief discussion of the "Jordanian option" and the so-called London Agreement. In April 1987, in his capacity as foreign minister in a Likud-Labor national unity government, Peres met secretly in London with King Hussein of Jordan, with whom he reached a written agreement on procedures for an international peace conference between Israel and her Arab adversaries. A joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation was formed to represent the Palestinians. The advantage from Israel's perspective was that the delegation excluded PLO members. However, Yitzhak

Shamir, Peres' coalition partner, was fiercely opposed to an international conference, and he rejected the agreement. Peres could have brought the national unity government down over his understanding with King Hussein, but lacked the courage of his convictions. The failure of the London Agreement was a factor in King Hussein's eventual decision to disengage from the West Bank in August 1988.

### **'Truth above all else'**

There is a more serious difficulty toward the end of the book, when Peres claims that Ben-Gurion was a leader with strong moral values. In the book, he asserts that Ben-Gurion had insisted that "truth is above all else" and that "Israel's destiny depended on ... its strength and its moral fiber." Indeed, we are told that Ben-Gurion associated "lies" with the difficult condition of Jews in the Diaspora who were forced to tell untruths as a means of survival. However, this image appears to be at odds with the Ben-Gurion who behaved mendaciously over the Qibya episode of October 1953 which is mentioned only briefly in the book. In the wake of terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians, an Israel Defense Forces unit was authorized by Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon to carry out a reprisal on a West Bank village in which 70 Palestinians, many of them women and children, were killed. Ben-Gurion said that the attack had been carried out by angry Israeli border residents. He broadcast this fraudulent claim on Israel's national radio, though he knew better.

One concludes the book with the sense that it is as much about Peres as it is about Ben-Gurion. The book does provide some useful and interesting insights into both leaders, even if Peres' special pleading on his mentor's behalf becomes a little irksome at times. There will be those who claim that Peres has utilized Ben-Gurion's legacy to burnish his own reputation. However, it could be argued equally that Peres has earned whatever reputation he has. In many

ways, he has certainly acted as Ben-Gurion's successor, combining elements of far-sighted pragmatism and hawkishness throughout his career, even though Peres is often seen as an idealistic, unrealistic dove.

Yet there are also substantial differences between the two leaders. Peres is the consummate diplomat who has always seemed to care about both domestic and international opinion. Indeed, some might say that he is too concerned these days about the former. One wonders what Peres could have accomplished as he strove to make peace, had he displayed more of Ben-Gurion's steel and ruthlessness toward domestic rivals.

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