

Shimon Peres

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am pleased that Shimon Peres is to be the president of Israel. Yes, I'd have preferred a religious Jew who could also have represented the spiritual greatness of our people, though I confess I don't know that many rabbis who would have fitted the bill. But it's nice to have someone at the top (even if it is symbolically) that we won't be ashamed of, or who won't put his foot in it most of the time. Let us forget his old political reputation as an untrustworthy plotter. He is now an elder statesman with a proven reputation for trying to achieve peace. He comes to office at a time when the presidency has been as discredited, as has most of Israel's political establishment. Yet his election has now been supported by all the major parties from Right to Left.

Apart from his unfortunate pronunciation of the "piss process", he is an articulate and elegant spokesman for Israel's cause. Not, of course, that this will make any difference to Israel's enemies, any more than the fact that Muslims has been responsible for killing ten times more Muslims than Israel has since 1948. When Tony Blair calls himself a Zionist, he probably has someone like Shimon Peres in mind. In my youth, this kind of Left-Wing Eastern European pioneer was the symbol so many young European socialists admired. He represented the cliché of the new Jew, tilling the land with one hand and a rifle in the other, living on a kibbutz, commuting to Bauhaus Tel Aviv.

I always felt alienated from secular Zionism; its arrogance in thinking it would supplant Judaism; its materialism, if not at that stage its consumerism. But my disdain for secular Zionism as an ideology was balanced by my nationalism, that Jews should have what everyone else claimed as their inalienable right too; a Land and State of their own. My own strongest practical argument in favor of a Jewish State is that Jewish life, institutions, scholarship and religion have flourished exponentially under its supportive wings, almost despite itself.

But, simultaneously, the dirty underside of religious politics has done more than anything else to discredit religion in Israel. That is another reason why I am pleased that there is to be a secular president at this moment in time. When religion in Israel can turn itself into a force for justice, equality, and honesty, then I think the average Israeli will be ready to welcome a man of God into the representative position.

I am also pleased that Ehud Barak is back in charge of Labor. He is neither charismatic nor attractive (unless you think his excellent piano playing compensates). He is highly intelligent, cultured man and a successful general. He is far more likely to carry public support for peace and concessions than any corrupt, money-grabbing sleazebag. And on the other hand he is better equipped to organize the defense of the state. But look at this. At the moment when it might be said that Israel has reached a nadir in its

image and support around the world, when it is being excoriated as a corrupt, militaristic, cruel, aggressive regime—lo and behold, it brings to the fore men of culture, moderation and peace.

Now let's look across the border, the fence, the wall, whatever. There you have a civil war of cruel ferocity where murderous fanatics, whether in the Holy Land or beyond, have hijacked the Palestinian people, holding their own as hostage in their thrust for violent power. (So much for the myth that Hamas is just a cuddly, caring social movement.) Oh, yes, I know it is all Israel's fault. If the Jews had not been there, the whole of the Middle East would today be as peaceful an oasis as Aceh, Algeria, or Mindanao. And I know no argument will change that. Just as I know that no argument will change our own religious fanaticism or persuade anyone that occupation is an unhealthy dehumanizing process that corrupts.

Hamas won power originally because Fatah was discredited and corrupt. True, its refusal to accept Israel and its call for violence also attracted supporters. Fatah had shown itself incapable of healing itself or ruling. Around the world the supporters of the Palestinian cause continued to pour money into it in the hope it would win. But, in fact, it has lost and now it is clear that Hamas is the dominant power in Gaza and probably in the West Bank too. With power it might actually succeed in controlling the rival Mafiosi gangs of smugglers and arms dealers.

The Arab world needs strong men, as the chaos in Iraq only proves. I think the Palestinians need Hamas. I am even optimistic for as we know it takes strength to compromise, not weakness. The old Arafat legacy of deception and corruption must be swept away. It is just possible a cleaner more honest Palestine might then emerge. But if not then appeasement never works as we know and effective, ethical self defense is the only option left.

The hatred of Judaism and Israel is now so irrational. The poverty and alienation of the Muslim street is so pervasive. Anti-Israelism has absorbed into its blood all the prejudices that previously found other outlets. Yet these past weeks I have begun to sense a shift in the wind. Not to any affection for the Jews or Israel but away from the myth that evil is only one sided. Sometimes to "know your enemy" and not be deceived, is the only basis for progress and it takes a bunch of loony trade unionists to wake the others up (though to wake Anglo Jewry up is almost like expecting the Resurrection).

It is a feature of Israeli society that its freedoms allow for some of its own citizens to try to destroy it from within, either by denying its legitimacy and calling for its downfall or by believing that retreating behind a fortress and killing one's enemies on the other side will bring peace and resolution. But we all know looking around the world today that we'd rather live under a regime that allows such freedoms than one that does not. One of the bright spots of the Middle East is the very presence of a society that, for all its mistakes, has the capacity to heal itself rather than destroy itself. I believe when people see this, within Israel and beyond, many of them will say, "That is the sort of society we need to preserve our sanity and hope, not a society of guns and bombs." Good luck Shimon.

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