

Twenty Years After Rabin

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After the destruction of the First Temple 2,500 years ago, the majority of the Jewish people were exiled to Babylon. The conqueror, Nebuchadnezzar, eventually eased some of his harsh restrictions and allowed some Jews to remain in the Land of Israel. He even appointed a righteous Jew named Gedaliah to administer the territory. Gradually, more Jews who had escaped from the horrors of the war into neighboring countries began to return to their homes in Israel.

Gedaliah was realistic about the limitations of Jewish sovereignty. He understood that for their own self-preservation, the Jews in Israel needed to fully cooperate with the nation who had conquered their land.

But this political subservience was intolerable to some Jews. A man named Ishmael ben Netaniah, spurred on by jealousy and foreign influence, arose. On the third of Tishrei, Ishmael treacherously killed Gedaliah as well as many other Jews and Babylonians.

In killing Gedaliah, Ishmael ben Netaniah finished off, catastrophically, the dispersion of the Jewish people from their land.

So do in modernity do we have Yigal Amir.

The assassination of the prime minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, succeeded in derailing the Oslo process underway in 1995. Twenty years on, hopes for compromise, let alone resolution, are fleeting.

Rabin's assassin was motivated by a deeply illogical religious justification, confirmed by haredi rabbis, that Rabin was a *din rodef*, someone who was intentionally doing harm to the Jewish people by making compromises under Oslo and would need to be killed. This was a concept that came to being because Jews often lived under alien rulers and had to take measures to protect themselves.

There is no one with a rational mind that would claim that Yitzhak Rabin could ever be considered a *din rodef*.

The talmudic concept was never meant to be used against a democratically elected leader for the time in which the Talmud was being created there were no democratically elected leaders.

Yet Rabin's assassin used this twisted rabbinic edict to believe that he had God's blessing to pursue his goal of stopping Oslo by murdering Rabin.

Unfortunately he appears to have succeeded.

Rabin, who was born in Jerusalem in 1922, was guided through his career as JJ Goldberg writes in the Forward by three motivating factors:

a ruthless commitment to Israel's security;

a belief in democratic government in a badly fractured society;

and an unshaken belief in the need for a partition of historic Palestine into Jewish and Arab states.

Rabin played an instrumental role in the War of Independence in 1948 and who, as an IDF general in 1967, led to the recapturing of the Old City of Jerusalem.

He was a hard-nosed realist.

He did not like Oslo.

He did not like Arafat.

Yet in his pragmatism that Israel needed to live in a hostile neighborhood in security led him to do what he had to do. One does not make peace with one's friends. Resolving conflict, even incrementally, always leads to actions that are wrenching to take. This is what Oslo required of both sides.

In the two years preceding his assassination, concrete steps were being taken to offer Palestinians self-rule, demilitarized, in Jericho and the Gaza Strip.

As the process began to take shape, there became a steady rumbling that grew louder and more ominous that any giving up of the land violated God's promise in the bible. It needed to be stopped through any means.

Rabin was increasingly compared to Hitler, Mussolini, and other enemies of the Jewish people. Posters of him with blood on his hands were displayed. Protesters gathered outside his Tel Aviv apartment building chanting slogans threatening his life. It was the ugly side of democracy.

His assassin took it upon himself to be the one who would end Rabin's life. In many ways, he succeeded.

Since his violent death in 1995, there have been multiple intifadahs and no end to life-destroying terrorism from outside of Israel and within.

I doubt that Rabin would ever compare himself to the prophets of Israel. The prophets were ones who told hard truths to the societies in which they lived that behaviors needed to be modified. That was not Rabin's way.

Rabin's way was to move carefully, thoughtfully, incrementally. His goal was an Israel that could co-exist with her neighbors, not an Israel that was in constant fear of being blown up in restaurants, stabbed in the streets, or run over by fellow Israelis, the Arabs who live in Israel proper.

The sages of the Talmud instituted a fast day to commemorate Gedaliya.

His murder represented the final nail in Jewish sovereignty in the land. The fast, in daytime hours only, comes on the Third of Tishri, right after Rosh Hashanah every year.

We are only 20 years away from the loss of Yitzhak Rabin. The wound is still fresh. The opportunities for grudging coexistence have evaporated. Solutions seem remote. Emotions run high.

Only two decades later, we mourn what could have been, for Rabin, for Israelis, for the Jewish people.

Let us hope that one day a leader will rise again, like Yitzhak Rabin, who understand that security must be premised on stopping violence against innocent people. Only then will there be an opportunity for coexistence in the hostile neighborhood where the Jewish State has existed for 67 years.