



PRIME MINISTER GRO HARLEM BRUNDTLAND

Yitzhak Rabin

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"I wanted to be a water engineer", Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin told us in his Nobel lecture here in Oslo one year ago, and the silence that followed was deafening.

And silence was a major theme in Yitzhak Rabin's personal testimony about the heavy burden of responsibility which rests upon the person, who is ultimately responsible for difficult decisions.

When the decision is made, and the advisers have left the room, the person in charge is alone, in silence, with his beliefs, his convictions and his doubts.

He went on to highlight what he called "the sanctity of life", which should be the overriding objective and principle of all leaders, political as well as military. "In order to protect life", - he said - "we must sometimes risk it."

Yitzhak Rabin never became a water engineer. Life placed a much greater responsibility on his shoulders. In order to protect life, he risked his own, and in the end, made the ultimate sacrifice, hit by an assassin.

A grief-stricken Israel - and a grief-stricken world - watched as friends and former foes paid a final tribute to this man who dedicated his life to public service - a commander in war who became a commander of peace.

We are here today to honour this very special man.

Yitzhak Rabin was the first native-born prime minister of Israel. Born in Jerusalem, he came to his task with a different view than most of his predecessors - of Israel and of the Jewish people. He was not burdened with a Holocaust image of the Jews as powerless victims. Rabin was brought up on Ben-Gurion's credo: "It does not matter what the nations think. What matters is what the Jews do".

Rabin's life experience was that of the Jew empowered by his own efforts on his own behalf. This self confidence led to Rabin's rejection of the thought that the surrounding world was anti Jewish. When Rabin presented the Declaration of Principles to Knesset for ratification 21 September 1993, he expressed this view in the following way;

"We must overcome the sense of isolation that has held us in thrall for almost half a century. We must join the international movement toward peace, reconciliation, and cooperation that is sweeping the entire globe....lest we be the last ones to remain, all alone."

When Rabin won the election in 1992, he promised peace with the Palestinians within 8 months. Would, finally, this conflict - one of the oldest known conflicts in the world - one of the most difficult and contentious - would that finally move towards an agreed settlement?

The international community was ready for it. World trends pointed to an increased importance for the Middle East region. The Gulf War of 1991 and the rise of Islamic radicalism both illustrated how fragile was the whole situation.

Political leaders of courage have prepared the region for the moves made in recent years. We remember with great respect Anwar Sadats first visit to Jerusalem and his speech to the Knesset. We remember the hopes and the fears. The terrorist attacks. Zealous security measures. Progress that was echoed by set-backs. We remember acrimonious debates in the United Nations. And we are grateful that these times are over.

As Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin was the right man at the right time. He enjoyed respect as an ardent defender of the security of the people of Israel. And we remember his personal testimony, recalling, how flying over the region, he would see a land of great opportunity, the agricultural land, the settlements, but also the graveyards. Endless such, of people whose lives ended senselessly early.

Prime Minister Rabin felt how this situation could not be allowed to go on.

In Israel, as people's views on the relationship with the Palestinians changed, new ways had to be found. The demographic changes in Israel had become dramatic; at an average, six thousand immigrants came to Israel every month in 1992 and 1993, choosing Israel as their home. Israel's perception of Gaza and the West Bank as a realisation of Israel's destiny was overtaken by a different agenda of nationbuilding.

It became clear for the leading politicians in Israel, and inside the Israeli Labour Party, that Israel had to gain acceptance in the region, or be faced with an uncertain future. If Israel insisted on retaining the territories with its rapidly growing population, it would have consequences for its identity as a Jewish state. The obvious conclusion was that Israel should negotiate with any group willing to recognise her right to exist within recognised and secure boundaries.

The signing ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House, on 13 September 1993, was a remarkably occasion, moving not only the key participants, but all of us who followed from afar.

Rabin himself was given a rifle when he was 16 years old. Images of the youth of Palestine and Israel gave us all hope that future generations would live, would love, would get their education and that new generations could become water engineers if they would like to, not soldiers.

For us in Norway it was a moment of gratitude as well. Norway was allowed to play a modest role as a facilitator and mediator. Now we saw - after years and months of hopes and doubts, that all these efforts came to fruition.

Many of us had known the key persons for a long time. The Socialist International had served as an arena for meetings between the Israeli Labour Party and the western social democrats, and, in parallel, the PLO and the social democratic party established their contacts, gradually building mutual understanding, also during the long night of animosity.

This persistent willingness to create peace has continued. On 28 September this year, the Interim Agreement for the West Bank was signed, making peace a cause for celebration among Palestinians. Israeli troops have left Jenin, and they are about to leave all other main towns and villages at the West Bank. Christmas this year in Bethlehem will be celebrated in a town controlled by the Palestinians.

Peace is becoming a reality on the ground and elections are due in January. Civilian authority, security and other vital functions of society have been taken over by the Palestinians.

For decades, the Middle East conflict had been seen as one of the most intractable international conflicts. Now, the peace process has opened windows of opportunities to participate actively in stabilising and solidifying what the Israeli and Palestinian political leaders and negotiators have achieved through protracted negotiations.

When Shimon Peres came to my office, shortly before the breakthrough of the Oslo Agreement, he asked that Norway give substantial development aid to the Palestinians. It struck me how things can change - the Foreign Minister of Israel was asking Norway to give our wholehearted support to the Palestinians.

After the ceremony in Washington 13 September 1993, the international community came together and pledged 2,4 billion USD in support of the peace process.

Today, more than 800 million has been transferred to the Palestinians, - a major achievement. We are pleased that new agreements have been negotiated in the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, where key donors and the parties are meeting in order to facilitate rapid and sustained economic growth in the Palestinian areas.

Norway alone has pledged to give 1 billion to the Palestinians over a four years period, this year close to 400 million. We are likely to reach the one billion one year ahead of schedule.

When the Interim Agreement was signed in Washington 28 September this year, it only took a few hours before the parties met donors and started preparation for a new Conference on Economic Assistance to the Palestinians.

This time around, the challenge is not primarily emergency relief and budget support, but to establish a medium term development program that will give the Palestinians in Gaza and West Bank better schools, hospitals, roads, clean water and sewerage systems that are working. We

also have to initiate a major housing program, in particular in Gaza, which has the fastest growing population in the world.

At the Paris Conference, to be held in January next year, Ministers of Foreign Affairs should give a clear message to the parties, and in particular to the Palestinians, that the international community is standing firm on their commitments of economic support. The Conference should also give a clear message of full international political backing to the continuation of the peace process.

There is no alternative, - a just and comprehensive peace in the region should be vigorously pursued by the parties, and be actively supported by the international community.

Norway remains ready to continue as an active partner of peace in the Middle East, to assist the parties in whatever way they find useful. As Chair of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee we are seeking to ensure a successful outcome of the Paris Conference. We will also continue to grant substantial economic support to the Palestinians and to the peace process.

Norway will also follow up the request outlined in the Interim Agreement to facilitate the process by increasing the contacts and understanding between Israelis and Palestinians in a "people to people" program.

We will have around 50 observers present at the Palestinian elections in January, an extremely important exercise in self determination.

I am convinced, that the experiences gained in the international follow up of the Middle East peace process should be drawn upon when peace-making is undertaken in other areas of the world. As we now launch a major international operation in Bosnia, we should draw upon the practical experiences gained in the international support to the Palestinians when designing the economic support activity in that region.

One year ago, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin rightfully was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together with now Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Chairman Yasser Arafat as an acknowledgement of their remarkable courage.

Yitzhak Rabin has been taken away from us, brutally and meaninglessly. His tragic death has placed an even greater responsibility on all of us. In a paradoxical way, his tragic death may have strengthened the peace process. The peace must be made secure and durable.

I was disembarking a plane in Beijing when I received the shocking news about the tragedy. I went to the Israeli Embassy in Beijing to pay my respect. The Israeli Ambassador in Beijing and I talked about personal meetings with Yitzhak Rabin, about his family who was mourning over a loved one - their father, husband and hero, to remember.

All who have been involved in the process, and all of us who met him, will greatly miss him.

We will miss his judgement, his serenity, his eye for detail. We will remember his vision and his courage. We will remember the silence.

"We wake up every morning, a different people now" - so he said in his Nobel Lecture.

In the deepest respect and gratitude, for the work of this man, in memory of Yitzhak Rabin,

I say Shalom, Peace.