

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at a Memorial Service for Former President Shimon Peres of Israel in Jerusalem

September 30, 2016

Tzvia, Yoni, Chemi, and generations of the Peres family; President Rivlin; Prime Minister Netanyahu; members of the Israeli Government and the Knesset; heads of state and government; and guests from around the world, including President Abbas, whose presence here is a gesture and a reminder of the unfinished business of peace; to the people of Israel: I could not be more honored to be in Jerusalem to say farewell to my friend Shimon Peres, who showed us that justice and hope are at the heart of the Zionist idea.

A free life, in a homeland regained. A secure life, in a nation that can defend itself, by itself. A full life, in friendship with nations who can be counted on as allies, always. A bountiful life, driven by the simple pleasures of family and by big dreams. This was Shimon Peres's life. This is the State of Israel. This is the story of the Jewish people over the last century, and it was made possible by a founding generation that counts Shimon as one of its own.

Shimon once said that, "The message of the Jewish people to mankind is that faith and moral vision can triumph over all adversity." For Shimon, that moral vision was rooted in an honest reckoning of the world as it is. Born in the shtetl, he said he felt "surrounded by a sea of thick and threatening forests." When his family got the chance to go to Palestine, his beloved grandfather's parting words were simple: "Shimon, stay a Jew." Propelled with that faith, he found his home. He found his purpose. He found his life's work. But he was still a teenager when his grandfather was burned alive by the Nazis in the town where Shimon was born. The synagogue in which he prayed became an inferno. The railroad tracks that had carried him toward the Promised Land also delivered so many of his people to death camps.

And so from an early age, Shimon bore witness to the cruelty that human beings could inflict on each other, the ways that one group of people could dehumanize another; the particular madness of anti-Semitism, which has run like a stain through history. That understanding of man's ever-present sinfulness would steel him against hardship and make him vigilant against threats to Jewry around the world.

But that understanding would never harden his heart. It would never extinguish his faith. Instead, it broadened his moral imagination, and gave him the capacity to see all people as deserving of dignity and respect. It helped him see not just the world as it is, but the world as it should be.

What Shimon did to shape the story of Israel is well chronicled. Starting on the kibbutz he founded with his love Sonya, he began the work of building a model community. Ben-Gurion called him to serve the Haganah at headquarters to make sure that the Jewish people had the armaments and the organization to secure their freedom. After independence, surrounded by enemies who denied Israel's existence and sought to drive it into the sea, the child who had wanted to be a "poet of stars" became a man who built Israel's defense industry, who laid the foundation for the formidable armed forces that won Israel's wars. His skill secured Israel's strategic position. His boldness sent Israeli commandos to Entebbe and rescued Jews from Ethiopia. His statesmanship built an unbreakable bond with the United States of America and so many other countries.

His contributions didn't end there. Shimon also showed what people can do when they harness reason and science to a common cause. He understood that a country without many natural resources could more than make up for it with the talents of its people. He made hard choices to roll back inflation and climb out from a terrible economic crisis. He championed the promise of science and technology to make the desert bloom and turned this tiny country into a central hub of the digital age, making life better not just for people here, but for people around the world.

Indeed, Shimon's contribution to this nation is so fundamental, so pervasive, that perhaps sometimes they can be overlooked. For a younger generation, Shimon was probably remembered more for a peace process that never reached its endpoint. They would listen to critics on the left who might argue that Shimon did not fully acknowledge the failings of his nation or perhaps more numerous critics on the right who argued that he refused to see the true wickedness of the world, and called him naive.

But whatever he shared with his family or his closest friends, to the world he brushed off the critics. And I know from my conversations with him that his pursuit of peace was never naive. Every Yom HaShoah, he read the names of the family that he lost. As a young man, he had fed his village by working in the fields during the day, but then defending it by carrying a rifle at night. He understood, in this war-torn region, where too often Arab youth are taught to hate Israel from an early age, he understood just how hard peace would be. I'm sure he was alternatively angry and bemused to hear the same critics, who called him hopelessly naive, depend on the defense architecture that he himself had helped to build.

I don't believe he was naive. But he understood from hard-earned experience that true security comes through making peace with your neighbors. "We won them all," he said of Israel's wars. "But we did not win the greatest victory that we aspired to: release from the need to win victories."

And just as he understood the practical necessity of peace, Shimon believed that Israel's exceptionalism was rooted not only in fidelity to the Jewish people, but to the moral and ethical vision, the precepts of his Jewish faith. "The Jewish people weren't born to rule another people," he would say. "From the very first day we are against slaves and masters."

Out of the hardships of the diaspora, he found room in his heart for others who suffered. He came to hate prejudice with the passion of one who knows how it feels to be its target. Even in the face of terrorist attacks, even after repeated disappointments at the negotiation table, he insisted that as human beings, Palestinians must be seen as equal in dignity to Jews, and must therefore be equal in self-determination. Because of his sense of justice, his analysis of Israel's security, his understanding of Israel's meaning, he believed that the Zionist idea would be best protected when Palestinians, too, had a state of their own.

Of course, we gather here in the knowledge that Shimon never saw his dream of peace fulfilled. The region is going through a chaotic time. Threats are ever present. And yet he did not stop dreaming, and he did not stop working. By the time that I came to work with Shimon, he was in the twilight of his years, although he might not admit it. I would be the 10th U.S. President since John F. Kennedy to sit down with Shimon; the 10th to fall prey to his charms. I think of him sitting in the Oval Office, this final member of Israel's founding generation, under the portrait of George Washington, telling me stories from the past, but more often talking with enthusiasm of the present: his most recent lecture, his next project, his plans for the future, the wonders of his grandchildren.

In many ways, he reminded me of some other giants of the 20th century that I've had the honor to meet—men like Nelson Mandela; women like Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth—leaders who have seen so much, whose lives span such momentous epochs, that they find no need to posture or traffic in what's popular in the moment; people who speak with depth and knowledge, not in sound bites. They find no interest in polls or fads.

And like these leaders, Shimon could be true to his convictions even if they cut against the grain of current opinion. He knew, better than the cynic, that if you look out over the arc of history, human beings should be filled not with fear but with hope. I'm sure that's why he was so excited about technology because for him, it symbolized the march of human progress. And it's why he loved so much to talk about young people, because he saw young people unburdened by the prejudices of the past. It's why he believed in miracles because in Israel, he saw a miracle come true.

As Americans and Israelis, we often talk about the unbreakable bonds between our nations. And, yes, these bonds encompass common interests—vital cooperation that makes both our nations more secure. But today, we are reminded that the bonds which matter most run deeper. Anchored in a Judeo-Christian tradition, we believe in the irreducible value of every human being. Our nations were built on that idea. They were built in large part by stubborn idealists and striving immigrants, including those who had fled war and fled oppression. Both our nations have flaws that we have not always fixed, corners of our history which date back to our founding that we do not always squarely address. But because our founders planted not just flags in the eternal soil, but also planted the seeds of democracy, we have the ability to always pursue a better world. We have the capacity to do what is right.

As an American, as a Christian, a person partly of African descent, born in Hawaii—a place that could not be further than where Shimon spent his youth—I took great pleasure in my friendship with this older, wiser man. We shared a love of words and books and history. And perhaps, like most politicians, we shared too great a joy in hearing ourselves talk. [*Laughter*] But beyond that, I think our friendship was rooted in the fact that I could somehow see myself in his story, and maybe he could see himself in mine. Because for all of our differences, both of us had lived such unlikely lives. It was so surprising to see the two of us where we had started, talking together in the White House, meeting here in Israel. And I think both of us understood that we were here only because in some way we reflected the magnificent story of our nations.

Shimon's story, the story of Israel, the experience of the Jewish people, I believe it is universal. It's the story of a people who, over so many centuries in the wilderness, never gave up on that basic human longing to return home. It's the story of a people who suffered the boot of oppression and the shutting of the gas chamber's door, and yet never gave up on a belief in goodness. And it's the story of a man who was counted on, and then often counted out, again and again, and who never lost hope.

Shimon Peres reminds us that the State of Israel, like the United States of America, was not built by cynics. We exist because people before us refused to be constrained by the past or the difficulties of the present. And Shimon Peres was never cynical. It is that faith, that optimism, that belief—even when all the evidence is to the contrary—that tomorrow can be better, that makes us not just honor Shimon Peres, but love him.

The last of the founding generation is now gone. Shimon accomplished enough things in his life for a thousand men. But he understood that it is better to live to the very end of his time on Earth with a longing not for the past, but for the dreams that have not yet come true:

an Israel that is secure in a just and lasting peace with its neighbors. And so now this work is in the hand of Israel's next generation, in the hands of Israel's next generation and its friends.

Like Joshua, we feel the weight of responsibility that Shimon seemed to wear so lightly. But we draw strength from his example and the fact that he believed in us, even when we doubted ourselves.

Scripture tells us that before his death, Moses said, "I call upon heaven and earth to bear witness this day that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live."

Uvacharta Bachayim. Choose life. For Shimon, let us choose life, as he always did. Let us make his work our own. May God bless his memory. And may God bless this country, and this world, that he loved so dearly.

Shimon: *Todah Rabah Chaver Yakar.*

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:14 a.m. at Mount Herzl. In his remarks, he referred to Tzvia Walden and Yoni and Nehemia "Chemi" Peres, children of President Peres; President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority; and Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom.

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