



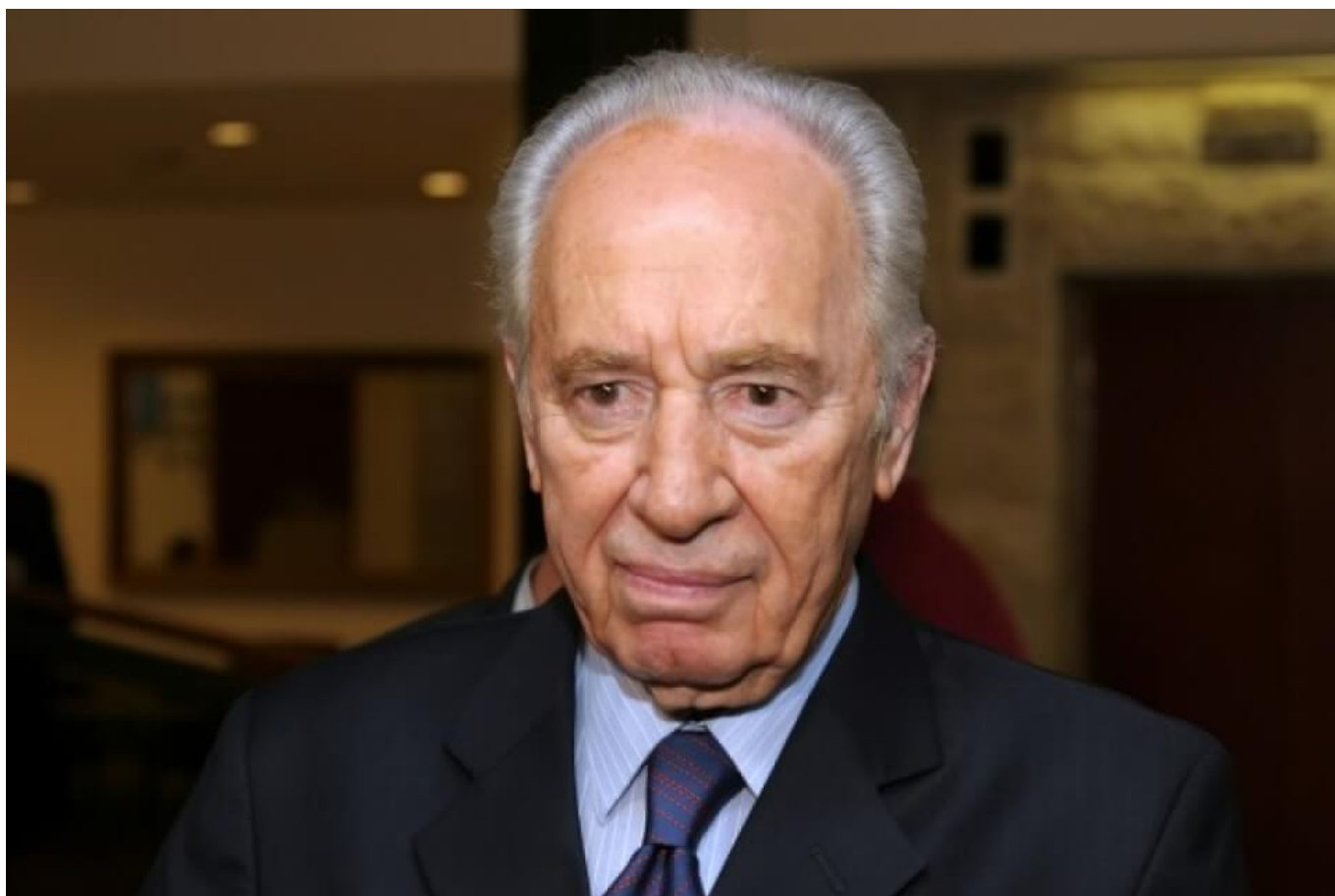
The Legacy of Shimon Peres

by

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on

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"We Didn't Build the Bomb to Make Another Hiroshima, but to Achieve Oslo"

Shimon Peres is being eulogized around the world as Israel's philosopher-king, its elegant worldly face to the world, the last of the Founding Fathers. The NY Times has published a news story, an op-ed by Tzipi Livni, and a Roger Cohen column, all of which amount to little more than hagiography. But there is a sizable number of critical appraisals like this one which have been published presenting Peres' darker side and which are very important reading.

What follows is a newly published note which Peres sent to Israel's leading nuclear historian, Avner Cohen. In 1999, Cohen had sent the Israeli leader a copy of his first book, *Israel and the Bomb*. In the book, Cohen offered an inscription portraying Peres' unique role in the creation of Israel nuclear weapons arsenal. Because Cohen hadn't used Peres as a source for this authoritative history



of Israel's first nuclear weapon (he hadn't thought an individual who had so many nuclear secrets would be able or willing to speak candidly), he didn't think Peres would respond. But he did and wrote the following:

To: Avner Cohen:

Thank you for your book, Israel and the Bomb, and for your fine dedication. I've gone through the first half of your book and find it interesting and absorbing. I believe you've done some fundamental research in which, as with other historical research—the narrative depends on the willingness of various individuals [sources] to reveal things. According to what was said to you, the proportions may not be quite exact. However, this is not your fault.

Essentially, I do not find fault with this because until now I have not felt able to reveal the full story.

But one thing I must say: we didn't build Dimona (Israel's nuclear weapons production facility) to make a Hiroshima, but rather to achieve Oslo [the note was written six years after the Oslo Accords were signed]: in Oslo I felt the full justification of this effort (to create The Bomb).

This represents yet another part of the Peres effort to project a civilized, liberal Israeli face to the world. We didn't build the bomb for destruction. We built it to enable us to be strong enough to compromise for peace. Whatever Peres may've really believed about why he built the Bomb, the result wasn't at all what he portrayed above. Israel's 200 nuclear weapons have served as a bulwark against compromise. In a phone conversation, Cohen told me that they "promoted Occupation." Instead of relying on peace or compromise, the nuclear arsenal has forced Israel to live (and die) "by the sword." The whole enterprise, Cohen told me, is built on "arrogance."

In parsing the original intent of Ben Gurion, who first set forth the race for nuclear weapons, Cohen believes Israelis needed a forceful tool to force the Arab states to admit that Israel could never be wiped off the map. A nuclear weapon would, so Israel's founder believed, would persuade his enemies that his country was "here to stay." It would be the ultimate "persuader." But it turned out to be much more than that.

Cohen believes that Israel's first nuclear weapon, hastily put together just before the 1967 War, directly led to that conflict. Having it, offered the Israelis a heady tonic that persuaded them they would be invincible; that regardless of what happened on the field of battle, they had a Doomsday weapon that would ultimately ensure victory.

Since no other regional power had or has WMD, Israel can never be forced to compromise against its will. Every front-line state, including Israel's allies like the U.S., know that if its back was up against the wall it could reject any solution that didn't accord with its perceived interests, because it possessed the ultimate weapon. This is a good deal of what lies behind the rejectionism of almost all previous Israeli prime ministers, all of whom have turned away from multiple opportunities to reach a final accord.

Dimona Succeeded, but Oslo Failed

Further, Oslo failed (though Peres couldn't have known that in 1999, when he wrote that note). It failed because Israeli leaders, including those in his own Labor Party, refused to honor the terms of the deal. Later, they refused to offer enough to the Palestinians at the second Camp David. They refused to make the necessary compromises to satisfy their peace partner. They knew they could get away with this, because they had a card in their back pocket that no one else in the region had. They knew they could walk away from the table and that there would be no meaningful consequences for doing so.

Those who support Israel's nuclear weapons may argue that the above claim is false because Israel



never threatened or used nuclear weapons, as the U.S. did against Japan. But this argument rings hollow because in 1973, at the outset of the October War, Israeli forces were being overrun in the Golan and Sinai. Defense minister Moshe Dayan went to Golda Meir with a plan to detonate a nuclear weapon in the desert to warn the Arabs that if they overran Israel, it would use The Bomb. Thankfully, Meir and her other advisors rejected Dayan's advice as that of a man under severe stress and a possible mental breakdown. But had Meir been a different person, Israel may very well have detonated at least one of its nukes.

There is absolutely no guarantee that in the future, should it face a similar threat, Israel would not use a nuclear weapon. After all, as distinguished an Israeli historian as Benny Morris advocated just such a prospect against Iran in the pages of none other than the New York Times.

After Peres', recent stroke, which eventually led to his death, I published this appraisal, which reveals another little-known element of Peres' pursuit of the Bomb with the connivance of the French during the run-up to the 1956 Suez War, of which Peres, Ben Gurion and Israel were eager partners.

Peres and the Theft of the Yemenite Children

An equally little-known darker side to the Peres legacy involved a scandal which has tainted Israel for decades. In the early 1950s, Israel airlifted 50,000 Yemenite Jews to the new state under the Orientalist rubric, Operation Magic Carpet. It did so in order to buttress its Jewish population, as Israel's leadership sought to balance the large numbers of Palestinians who remained in Israel after the 1948 Nakba.

Though Israel heralded the airlift to the world as its heroic effort to save an ancient Jewish community, in truth it treated the new immigrants shabbily. It sent them to camps little better than the DP camps to which Holocaust survivors were consigned after WWII. Later, it sent them to development towns which consisted of little more than tents and basic services. Over time, the Yemenites became part of the Israeli Mizrahi minority which faced severe discrimination at the hands of the Ashkenazi (European) majority.

But Israeli authorities committed a far worse crime against these immigrants. It systematically stole Yemenite children from their families and offered them to Ashkenazi couples who were unable to conceive or sought to adopt babies. Some of these children (estimates range as high as 1,000 were stolen) were even sent abroad (one was tracked to Belgium). Authorities at the time believed the Yemenite were primitive people who would not integrate into a superior "western" society. Israel wanted them to assimilate quickly and believed if the newborn were given to Ashkenazi families they would have a proper, civilized upbringing that would bring them into the modern, advanced world.

The racism of this project is now clear. Projects with similar tragic consequences were played out in other countries in that era, including Native American and Aboriginal children taken from families to be raised in government schools. The difference is that Israel has consistently refused to make an accounting of what happened leaving an open, weeping sore where there should be healing, repentance and restitution.

Israel has investigated this scandal several times but has never fully exposed the reason for the kidnapping, who orchestrated the plan, or who were the victims. So historians do not know precisely how many children were stolen. This has left an indelible stain on the Israeli Yemenite community and a severe breach between it and the State. Mothers who were told lies that their babies died after childbirth, have never had a proper accounting of what happened. They know they have children in the world, but they don't know who or where they are.

Shimon Peres, when he was prime minister, refused to appoint a commission with full powers to investigate the child theft. Instead, he hand-picked three mid-level bureaucrats in 1985, who were given extremely limited resources, to investigate. One of them was a senior police officer, Amon Navot. Sampson Giat, then president of the Yemenite Jewish Federation, wrote a 1993 book about the scandal in which he said:



In 1985, Arnon Navot, a high-ranking policeman, was the head of the country's missing persons' bureau. There was increased pressure on Prime Minister Shimon Peres to have another committee investigation after the lack of results of the former Bahalul Minkovsky Committee came up with only 342 missing children. Afterwards, 600 more children's names were added.

Peres, rather than forming another government committee instructed Arnon Navot to head a task force with two others. Since Peres had no intention of creating a public committee, he did not give Navot the tools necessary to investigate.

Navot claims that his superiors put hurdles in front of him. He was not allowed to store information on his computer; his official car was taken from him so that he had to carry loads of documents on public transportation.

Navot found evidence that a child, whose parents were told he had died, had been illegally adopted by a family in Belgium. His superiors would not allow him to follow up on his findings.

Navot was convinced that Shimon Peres, like most politicians, was afraid of the political fallout resulting from any discoveries. The cover up started.

When you read glowing encomium's like those in the NY Times, remember the darker side of Shimon Peres. Whatever good he may've done is more than outweighed by his profound lapses in judgment and morality.