

Reflections on Rabin

By Avi Benlolo – November 4, 2015

Yitzhak Rabin died exactly twenty years ago today, a day that shall forever remain etched in my memory.

At twenty-four years old and a new professional at a major Jewish organization, I was handed the opportunity of organizing an immediate major community memorial at a local arena.

The arena turned out to be much too small as grief in the Jewish community was irreconcilable. We all felt lumps in our throats as we tried to imagine how life would be without Rabin, a man who gave hope and inspiration to my generation.

Who could possibly forget September 13, 1993 when Rabin stood on the lawn of the White House with Bill Clinton and Yasir Arafat and solemnly expressed, “We have no desire for revenge. We harbor no hatred towards you. We, like you, are people who want to build a home, to plant a tree, to love, live side by side with you - in dignity, in empathy, as human beings, as free men. We are today giving peace a chance and again saying to you: Let us pray that a day will come when we will say, enough, farewell to arms”.

After decades of war and conflict, he gave the people of Israel and Jewish communities around the world profound hope. All at once, the signing of the Oslo Accords lifted the spirit of everyone in the Middle East. Arab nations were open to welcoming Israeli missions and consulates, to lifting embargos, to opening trade and to recognizing Israel.

Conversely, Israelis were busily joining Palestinians to build industrial zones in order to boost the Palestinian economy and standard of living. Around the world, Jewish communities were extending their hand in peace to their Palestinian brothers.

This naturally led to the historic peace treaty with Jordan only one year later. In fact, a photograph of Rabin shaking hands with King Hussein at a ceremony in the Negev on October 26, 1994 still graces the wall of my office, a reminder of better times.

Days later, these dreams of peace were shattered when Rabin was assassinated at a peace rally in Tel Aviv on November 4, 1994. None of us could reconcile that he was shot and killed by another Jew. How could a Jew kill another Jew, or anyone else for that matter?

It was a sobering time and perhaps, one of the darkest days of my professional career in the Jewish community. Young teenagers lit candles – hundreds of candles – outside the arena. I wondered about their future.

We cried not only because we lost a peacemaker. We cried because our hopes and dreams for peace with the Palestinians had been lost. Not too soon after, Arafat failed his partner in peace and unleashed a wave of terror on Israel never seen before. It also brought despair to his own people.

Shir La Shalom – the "song of peace" – was the last song Rabin sang at the peace rally in Tel Aviv on the night of his death. A fitting song for a man of peace and for a people in search of peace.

Let us not despair. Rabin paved the road for all of us. Peace will prevail.

Avi