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Shimon Peres - 1997

"Peace in the Middle East: An Update"

Nobel Peace prize winner, former President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Israel, Shimon Peres stated "You have to negotiate the peace and this calls for compromise on both sides." "When you win a war, you're a hero. When you compromise for peace, you're a traitor." Shimon Peres has led a life packed with drama and action, ever since his parents brought him from Byelorussia to Palestine as an 11-year old boy in 1923. In his busy life he has held just about every key post in Israel's government, including the key positions of Foreign Minister and Prime Minister. He has assumed national leadership several times-twice being required to replace his close friend Yitzhak Rabin. On the first occasion, it was because Rabin had resigned to form a new party with David Ben-Gurion. The second was following Rabin's assassination. "It was a very sad experience seeing your best friend killed right before your eyes, because he was in the search for peace."

Shimon Peres has played many other parts, quite apart from involvement in his country's wars against neighboring Arab states-in his twenties, for example, he served in the unofficial Israeli army, responsible for both manpower and weaponry in the last days of the British Protectorate. Shimon Peres stated "We need a new strategy for a new age. Whether we like it or not, the world is becoming borderless. Guided missiles are no respecters of lines drawn on a map. Technology does not need a visa. The new age brings new dangers, not just to Israel, but also to many Arab states. "Holiness," he said trenchantly, "often begins where reason ends. And holiness plus nuclear weapons represents real danger."

The real problem is changing people's attitudes. When Peres and Prime Minister Rabin concluded the Middle East agreement at Camp David, with the support of President Clinton, the time came for Rabin to shake hands with Arafat. "I could see by his body language that he didn't like doing it." Peres admitted. But when he later had to deal direct with Arafat, Shimon Peres had to recognize that the Palestinian leader was in some ways very similar to himself-a worried man with his own problems, his own shortcomings, with many people on his own side with whom he didn't see eye to eye.

On the price of peace, it fell to the Israeli Foreign Minister to bring a remarkable evening to an end. He did it in a way that the many top businessmen in his audience would understand, "There is no such thing as a low-cost peace." The only justification for the cost of peace", he concluded, is that the cost of war is always higher."

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In 1997, Shimon Peres created the Centre for Peace with the aim of advancing Arab-Israeli joint ventures.

Mr. Peres forecast today's terrifying situation-both the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the terrorist attacks on the USA-with frightening accuracy in his 1997 speech. Despite the fact that Israeli politics are currently dominated by hard-right hawks, we can only hope that his reputation, moderation, common sense, negotiating skills and powers of persuasion can still be effectively used to help bring peace out of turmoil.

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