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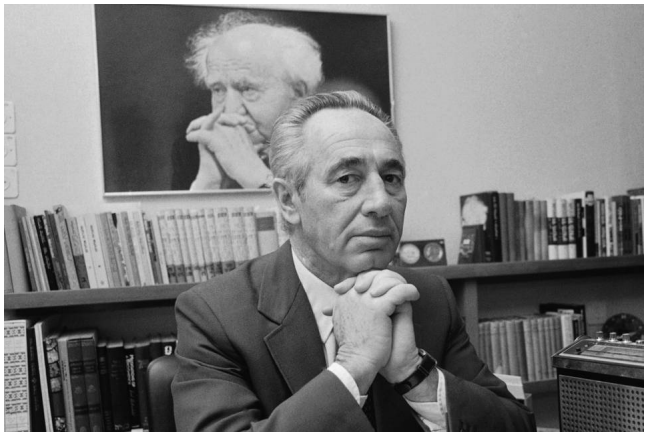
OPINION | COMMENTARY

Shimon Peres: Israel's Last Founding Father

The two-time prime minister, who died Wednesday at 93, was first of all a mensch.



Shimon Peres in his office in 1981. *PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By **BRET STEPHENS**

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Shimon Peres was on the line, irate. The Jerusalem Post, of which I was then the editor, had published a front-page story on a government bill without, he said, reporting on what he, as leader of the opposition, had to say on the matter. So scalding was the rebuke that it was all I could do to mumble that he was mistaken. We had quoted him extensively—after the jump.

"The jump?"

"The inside pages. The article was too long to run on the front page."

"I see. I'll look."

Two days later a letter arrived in the mail. It was Peres, writing to apologize. I have kept it ever since, not just as a memento from a historic figure, but also as a reminder that great power ought never to elevate anyone above small decencies. Shimon Peres—Israel's president, two-time prime minister, three-time foreign minister, Nobel Peace Laureate, and last surviving founding father until his

death Wednesday at 93—was first of all a mensch.

Not that he lacked for ego, ambition and a talent for political maneuver. Born Szymon Perski in what is now Belarus, he came to Mandatory Palestine as a boy in 1934. By his early 20s he had caught the eye of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, who delegated one task after another to his brilliant protégé. Peres helped found Israel's Navy, established the Israeli arms-maker Rafael (today the maker of the Iron Dome air defense system), forged a strategic military partnership with France, and arranged the construction of Israel's first nuclear reactor—all by age 40. Had he been an American, he would have been Henry Kissinger, Henry Stimson and Henry Kaiser rolled into one.

The scope of his achievements was in keeping with Zionism's first commandment: "If you will it, it is no dream." As minister of defense in the mid-1970s, he urged a reluctant Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to order the daring rescue of Israeli hostages at the Entebbe airport in Uganda, proving that a courageous democracy could defeat terror. A decade later, as prime minister, he worked with U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz to rescue Israel's economy from hyperinflation—while also rescuing thousands of Ethiopian Jews from persecution and starvation under the Communist Mengistu regime. For good measure, he also helped lay the groundwork to turn Israel into the high-tech, startup culture for which it is now known.

His biggest dream was peace with Israel's Arab neighbors. The end of the Cold War gave Peres what he thought was a historic opening with Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization, which had lost its Soviet patron. But while Peres was eager to go from hawk to dove, Arafat could not rise from terrorist to statesman. The 1993 Oslo Accords for which the two men shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Rabin collapsed in a wave of suicide bombings at the turn of the millennium.

For a while, Peres was one of the most reviled personalities in Israel. In 2007 he was elevated to Israel's symbolic presidency, partly to honor him, partly to neutralize him politically. He left the office a revered figure.

And he never lost his optimism. In 2002 I sat next to him on a long flight from Johannesburg to Tel Aviv. He was reading historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's history of food. I listened intently to him wax philosophically on agriculture, then nanotechnology, then a plan to replenish the Dead Sea with water from the Red Sea. He wanted only to talk about the future, not the past. He was nearly 80 at the time, still dreaming big. His legacy is that his country is, too.

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