

The Poet and The Slain Statesman

by Dean Andromidas

In ancient Greece, the true statesmen were the poets, because true statecraft could not be left in the hands of mere politicians. Through their immortal tragedies, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides labored to save Greece, while Pericles and Demosthenes, through their sophistry, labored to destroy it. Commemorating the 11th anniversary of the political assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, at a time of profound moral and political crisis in Israel, demanded a poet, not a mere politician.

One hundred thousand Israelis filled Tel Aviv's Rabin Square on Nov. 4 to hear only one speaker, David Grossman. One of Israel's leading writers and poets, Grossman was an appropriate choice to commemorate the slain peace-maker, because he has used his art to bring together Israelis and Palestinians. His choice was important for another reason: He lost a son in the recent Lebanon war. Although Grossman initially supported the war, within days, he and authors Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua held a press conference calling on the government to accept Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Sini-ora's call for a ceasefire. Two days later, his son was killed in action in southern Lebanon.

One witness to the event, commentator Nehemia Strasler, wrote in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*, that contrary to those who tried to belittle the rally by claiming few would show up, "tens of thousands, including many teenagers, stood in silence, hanging on every word in the long and chilling speech. . . . He laid before them an entire plan of action—'yes' to speaking to the Palestinian people, and 'yes' to [Syrian President] Bashar Assad's peace feelers." Grossman spoke eloquently and with biting words of Israel's "hollow leadership" and the necessity for Israel to accept the "Peace of No Choice." His powerful, politically incorrect speech looked deep into the "abyss" into which Israel has sunk. It was not a "feel good" speech, but hit hard in the gut, to say either "act" or become part of Israel's self-destruction.

Thirteen years ago, on Sept. 13, 1993, on the White House lawn, with President Bill Clinton looking on, Rabin shook the hand of Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, putting into effect the Oslo Peace Accords. Those Accords promised not only to end the 100-year-long conflict in which Arabs and Jews have been embroiled, but laid the foundations of a Palestinian state living in peace, side-by-side with Israel. Echoing Lyndon LaRouche's Oasis Plan for a Middle East Peace, the "economic annexes" of that docu-

ment laid out a program of regional economic projects, including water desalination plants, transport projects, and the establishment of industrial zones.

By the end of 1999, the "Oslo process" should have ended with the establishment of a Palestinian state. But that was not to be, because Israeli hard-liners Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu, the latter the personal protégé of George Shultz, launched a campaign not only against the Accords, but also of incitement against Rabin personally. On the night of Nov. 4, 1995, moments after he addressed a huge peace rally of 200,000 people, which had filled his heart with hope and determination to complete the Oslo process, Rabin was cut down by a Jewish assassin's bullet. Rabin lost his life for his courageous struggle, but Israel, now, 11 years later, is on the verge of losing all hope.

We present here lengthy excerpts of Grossman's Nov. 6 speech, because it gives an insight into the way many Israelis see the moral crisis of their nation. More importantly, as a speech written by a poet, it has a universality that expresses the moral and political crisis facing the Western world today. Grossman's biting critique of Israel's "hollow leadership" is written in words appropriate to almost every leading government in the West. His call for peace is no sophistry, but echoes the principle of the Treaty of Westphalia, in which a true peace aims at assuring the happiness of your former enemy.

Documentation

Grossman: Israel Is Squandering Its Miracle

The annual memorial ceremony for Yitzhak Rabin is the moment when we pause for a while to remember Rabin the man, the leader. And we also take a look at ourselves, at Israeli society, its leadership, the national mood, the state of the peace process, at ourselves as individuals in the face of national events.

It is not easy to take a look at ourselves this year. There was a war, and Israel flexed its massive military muscle, but also exposed Israel's fragility. We discovered that our military might ultimately cannot be the only guarantee of our existence. . . . I am speaking here tonight as a person whose love for the land is overwhelming and complex, and yet it is unequivocal, and as one whose continuous covenant with the land has turned his personal calamity into a covenant of blood.

I am totally secular, and yet in my eyes the establishment and the very existence of the State of Israel is a miracle of sorts that happened to us as a nation—a political, national,

human miracle. I do not forget this for a single moment. Even when many things in the reality of our lives enrage and depress me, even when the miracle is broken down to routine and wretchedness, to corruption and cynicism, even when reality seems like nothing but a poor parody of this miracle, I always remember. And with these feelings, I address you tonight.

“Behold land, for we hath squandered,” wrote the poet Saul Tchernikovsky in Tel Aviv in 1938. He lamented the burial of our young again and again in the soil of the Land of Israel. The death of young people is a horrible, ghastly waste.

But no less dreadful is the sense that for many years, the State of Israel has been squandering, not only the lives of its sons, but also its miracle; that grand and rare opportunity that history bestowed upon it, the opportunity to establish here a state that is efficient, democratic, which abides by Jewish and universal values; a state that would be a national home and haven, but not only a haven, also a place that would offer a new meaning to Jewish existence; a state that holds as an integral and essential part of its Jewish identity and its Jewish ethos, the observance of full equality and respect for its non-Jewish citizens.

How Did This Happen to Israel?

Look at what befell us. Look what befell the young, bold, passionate country we had here, and how, as if it had undergone a quickened aging process, Israel lurched from infancy and youth to a perpetual state of gripe, weakness, and sourness. How did this happen? . . . How do we continue to watch from the side as though hypnotized by the insanity, rudeness, violence, and racism that has overtaken our home?

One of the most difficult outcomes of the recent war is the heightened realization that at this time there is no king in Israel, that our leadership is hollow. Our military and political leadership is hollow. I am not even talking about the obvious blunders in running the war, of the collapse of the home front, nor of the large-scale and small-time corruption.

I am talking about the fact that the people leading Israel today are unable to connect Israelis to their identity. Certainly not with the healthy, vitalizing, and productive areas of this identity, with those areas of identity and memory and fundamental values that would give us hope and strength, that would be the antidote to the waning of mutual trust, of the bonds to the land, that would give some meaning to the exhausting and despairing struggle for existence.

The fundamental characteristics of the current Israeli leadership are primarily anxiety and intimidation, of the charade of power, the wink of the dirty deal, of selling out our most prized possessions. In this sense they are not true leaders, certainly they are not the leaders of a people in such a complicated position that has lost the way it so desperately needs. . . .

Look at those who lead us. Not all of them, of course, but many among them. Behold their petrified, suspicious, sweaty conduct. The conduct of advocates and scoundrels. It is pre-



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David Grossman, who lost his son in the Lebanon war, addressed 100,000 Israelis, commemorating the assassination of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. He called on Israel to do whatever it takes to make a peace settlement with the Palestinians. Grossman was an initial supporter of the war.

posterous to expect to hear wisdom emerge from them, that some vision or even just an original, truly creative, bold and ingenuous idea would emanate from them. When was the last time a Prime Minister formulated or took a step that could open up a new horizon for Israelis, for a better future?

Mr. Prime Minister, I am not saying these words out of feelings of rage or revenge. I have waited long enough to avoid responding on impulse. You will not be able to dismiss my words tonight by saying a grieving man cannot be judged. Certainly I am grieving, but I am more pained than angry. This country and what you and your friends are doing to it pains me.

A Future Without Unresolved Conflict

Trust me, your success is important to me, because the future of all of us depends on our ability to act. Yitzhak Rabin took the road of peace with the Palestinians. . . . Rabin decided to act, because he discerned very wisely that Israeli society would not be able to sustain itself endlessly in a state of an unresolved conflict. He realized long before many others that life in a climate of violence, occupation, terror, anxiety, and hopelessness, extracts a price Israel cannot afford. This is all relevant today, even more so. We will soon talk about the partner that we do or do not have, but before that, let us take a look at ourselves.

We have been living in this struggle for more than 100 years. We, the citizens of this conflict, have been born into war and raised in it, and in a certain sense indoctrinated by it. Maybe this is why we sometimes think that this madness in which we have lived for over 100 years is the only real thing, the only life for us, and that we do not have the option, or even the right, to aspire for a different life. Maybe this would



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Prime Minister Yitahak Rabin came to the realization that constantly fighting the Palestinians would provide no long-term future for Israel. Shown here is Rabin shaking hands with PLO leader Yasser Arafat in 1993 at the White House, after the signing of the Oslo Accords, with President Clinton looking on.

explain the indifference with which we accept the utter failure of the peace process, a failure that has lasted for years and claims more and more victims. . . .

And these are partly the cause of Israel's quick descent into the heartless, essentially brutal treatment of its poor and suffering. This indifference to the fate of the hungry, the elderly, the sick, and the disabled, all those who are weak, this equanimity of the State of Israel in the face of human trafficking or the appalling employment conditions of our foreign workers, which border on slavery, to the deeply ingrained institutionalized racism against the Arab minority.

The calamity that struck my family and myself with the falling of our son, Uri, does not grant me any additional rights in the public discourse, but I believe that the experience of facing death and the loss, brings with it a sobriety and lucidity, at least regarding the distinction between the important and the unimportant, between the attainable and the unattainable.

[Grossman then speaks of the necessity for a peace initiative, asking what Israel's approach to a Hamas-led Palestine should be.]

Keep strangling them more and more, keep mowing down hundreds of Palestinians in Gaza, most of whom are innocent civilians like us? Kill them and get killed for all eternity?

[No, he responds, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert must:]

Speak to their deep grief and wounds, acknowledge their ongoing suffering. . . . The power of simple human compassion, particularly in this, a state of deadlock and dread. Just once, look at them not through the sights of a gun, and not

behind a closed roadblock. You will see there a people that is tortured no less than us. An oppressed, occupied people bereft of hope. . . . Take a look at the overwhelming majority of this miserable people, whose fate is entangled with our own, whether we like it or not. . . .

Make the Bravest Possible Offer

Talk to them, make them an offer their moderates can accept. . . . Approach them with the bravest and most serious plan Israel can offer. . . . We have no choice and they have no choice.

And a peace of no choice should be approached with the same determination and creativity as one approaches a war of no choice. And those who believe we do have a choice, or that time is on our side do not comprehend the deeply dangerous processes already in motion. . . .

Maybe, Mr. Prime Minister, you need to be reminded, that if an Arab leader is sending a peace signal, be it the slightest and most hesitant, you must accept it, you must test immediately its sincerity and seriousness. You do not have the moral right not to respond.

Disagreements today between right and left are not that significant. The vast majority of Israel's citizens understand this already, and know what the outline for the resolution of the conflict would look like. Most of us understand, therefore, that the land would be divided, that a Palestinian state would be established.

Why, then, do we keep exhausting ourselves with the internal bickering that has gone on for 40 years? Why does our political leadership continue to reflect the position of the radicals and not that held by the majority of the public? It is better to reach national consensus before circumstances, or God forbid, another war, force us to reach it. If we do it, we would save ourselves years of decline and error, years when we will cry time and again: "Behold land, for we hath squandered."

From where I stand right now, I beseech, I call on all those who listen, the young who came back from the war, who know they are the ones to be called upon to pay the price of the next war, on citizens, Jew and Arab, people on the right and the left, the secular, the religious, stop for a moment, take a look into the abyss. Think of how close we are to losing all that we have created here. Ask yourselves if this is not the time to get a grip, to break free of this paralysis, to finally claim the lives we deserve to live."