

Leah Rabin's Agenda of Peace

by Harley Schlanger

On March 4, 1996, four months after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination at the hand of a Jewish fanatic opposed to the Oslo Peace Accord he had initiated, Leah Rabin spoke at a ceremony honoring her and her husband, at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey.

In concluding her speech, she said, "When I am asked whether I have an agenda, I say I do indeed. As the person closest to him, who loved him all his life, who was beside him at all the crossroads, who knew intimately the workings of his great mind and his courageous heart, I feel an acute responsibility to carry his message forward, to ignite again the brilliant light that was so brutally extinguished.

"I am here to remind you of him."

Leah Rabin, who died on Nov. 12 at the age of 72, honored that commitment to her husband's memory to the very end of her life. With the peace process unravelling, because of the deadly overreaction of Israeli police and armed forces to a new *Intifada*, which was triggered in response to the provocative actions of Ariel Sharon, she made one final effort to bring the two sides together.

In a letter to Prime Minister Ehud Barak, she reminded him of his pledge that he would "leave no stone unturned" to uphold "Yitzhak's legacy," to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians. She urged him to turn to her husband's former rival, Shimon Peres, to reinstate communication with Yasser Arafat, writing that "Yitzhak knew how to overcome the differences of the past; he recognized the special qualities of Shimon and worked with him . . . in the difficult hours of decision."

Shortly after this appeal to Barak appeared in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, Peres and Arafat met, to try to halt the confrontations which threaten to escalate into full-scale war.

Woman of Passion

Born Leah Schlossberg in Königsberg, Germany on April 8, 1928, her upbringing was typical of educated German Jewish families of the time, whose lives had been enriched by the Haskala movement inspired in the 18th Century by Moses Mendelssohn. In her book, *Rabin: Our Life, His Legacy*, she writes of growing up with the poetry of Goethe and Heine, and the music of Beethoven. "Papa was a great admirer of culture in general, and German culture in particular, and these passions were strongly woven into our everyday life."



Yitzhak Rabin with fiancée Leah.

Yet, the day after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, her father, who had become a Zionist, moved the family to Palestine. It was there, during the summer of 1943, that she met her future husband, who was a soldier in the Palmach, which was a military force to defend the Jews of Palestine. They soon became a couple, and were married during a cease-fire in the 1948 War of Independence.

From that day, until her husband's assassination, their lives were fully intertwined with the life of their nation. In a speech describing their lives together, she said that it was "forty-seven years of struggle for survival, for peace, for security. Forty-seven years of a wonderful marriage that ended all too soon. . . . How privileged we were to be side by side at every crossroad of our country's short history."

It is clear from her memoir, and other published reminiscences, that she played a highly influential role in her husband's life, especially when they reached a crossroad. One such moment was in 1987, when Yitzhak Rabin was given the assignment of crushing the original *Intifada*, which began in December. At first, Rabin acted in concert with the axioms which were accepted by most Israelis after their victory in the 1967 war: that Israel's security depended on holding the territories seized in that war, and in keeping the Palestinian population under control by brute force.

But Rabin soon realized that this approach would never provide security and peace. "The *Intifada*," Mrs. Rabin wrote, "made it wholly clear to Yitzhak that Israel could not govern another people." The application of force not only increased the bitterness of the Palestinians, but was turning the Israeli youth who administered daily beatings into what he described as "storm troopers." By 1989, she continued, he "was gradually moving toward advocating Palestinian autonomy and self-determination."

Upon reaching this conclusion, Rabin sought out his long-term adversary within the Labor Party, Shimon Peres, and reached an agreement with him. This led to a Labor Party victory in the 1992 elections, returning Rabin to the office of