

Chapel speech at Ohio Northern University English Chapel

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It is said in Judaism that every life is sacred and every death is tragic. When Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was buried on Monday he was wrapped in a canvas shroud and buried in a simple pine box which is part of the Jewish burial tradition. The statement that every death is tragic and the simple Jewish burial rituals are to remind Jews that everyone is equal in death in the eyes of God. Why then did so many heads of state attend the funeral service for Prime Minister Rabin - including Egypt's President Mubarak, Jordan's King Hussein, Presidents Clinton, Bush and Carter, British Prime Minister Major, German Chancellor Kohl, French President Chirac and former Arabs who had fought against Prime Minister Rabin when he was General Rabin in the Israel Defense Force. To answer this it is necessary to review Yitzhak Rabin's life.

Mr. Rabin's parents fled to Palestine to avoid the bloody sheath of hatred that was enveloping and killing European Jewry. In many European cities Jews were forced to live in ghettos; in Europe and in Russia Jews were victims of Pogroms which were organized riots accompanied by murder and pillage of Jewish communities. Throughout most of the several thousand years of Jewish history Jews have not had a homeland where they could be safe and secure. Palestine represented a place Jews had first inhabited thousands of years ago; a place where Jews had continued to live although they suffered terrible hatred and oppression under Arab rule. Pogroms also occurred against Jews living in Arab countries.

Palestine an undeveloped third-world part of Asia devoid of most resources was an area of last resort for Jews to settle. Zionism which has been condemned by many including the United Nations - was merely a movement to find a home for Jews - a people no one wanted. This was the world Mr. Rabin entered when he was born in Palestine in 1922. His youthful ambition was agronomy. He studied and graduated first in his class at school full of youthful vigor and inspiration with a desire to cultivate the soil to make Israel flourish. But the world into which Mr. Rabin was born made his ambition impossible. Instead, he gave up his dream - he dropped his plowshare and picked up the sword and became a soldier. His young adult life was dedicated to army service whose stock and trade is killing. He became well acquainted with killing both personally as a resistance fighter, a combat soldier and later as a military commander and leader.

After the Nazi Holocaust was perpetrated against European Jewry during World War II the Jewish survivors found themselves in Displaced Persons camps - liberated but still unwanted and with nowhere to go these Jews migrated to Palestine to help forge a new independent state - a homeland in the sand - Israel. Israel - founded in 1948 - ultimately became the homeland for Jews who survived the Holocaust and for Jews who fled terrible oppression, violence and murder in both Europe and the Arab world.

In this world Mr. Rabin became a soldier and leader who was forced along with other Jews to fight for their survival. Mr. Rabin excelled at this vocation - but he came full circle and in a way he returned to his youthful ambition when he put down his sword and took up his plowshare again and extended the hand of peace to his enemies in 1993. Extending the olive branch was a courageous act for Prime Minister Rabin. He sat down with the leader of the PLO - an organization whose goal was the extermination of the Jewish people in Israel. Additionally, the people of the state of Israel were and continue to be divided on the issue of surrendering land for peace. In this climate it took tremendous courage to put down the sword and sit down with enemies to attempt peace in the Middle East. The first Middle East leader who put down the sword to pursue peace with Israel - President Sadat of Egypt - was also assassinated. It is ironic that Prime Minister Rabin was attending a peace rally when he was gunned down.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Rabin's action of extending the hand of peace to his enemies exemplified a Bible passage in Proverbs - which says: "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."