

For this Sunday, November 10, 2019, the Today's Issues group will discuss two essays from the November 7 issue of The New York Review of Books:

P. 11 Michael Gorra, "[A Heritage of Evil](#)," about how the Germans have dealt with the holocaust and how the US is dealing with or should deal with the history of slavery, lynching and denial of civil rights

P. 32, Assaf Sharon, "The Long Paralysis of the Israeli Left," about why the Israeli left failed to vigorously advocate for the two-state solution that Yitzhak Rabin was negotiating before his assassination in 1985 and its ongoing weakness today.

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the Church at 9:30 on Sunday morning. Please do the readings and join our lively discussion.

The Heritage of Evil can be read on the NYR web site without a password, [click here](#). A copy of "The Long Paralysis of the Israeli Left" is attached.

The Long Paralysis of the Israeli Left

Assaf Sharon NOVEMBER 7, 2019 ISSUE

Killing a King: The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the Remaking of Israel

by Dan Ephron

Norton, 290 pp., \$16.95 (paper)

Yitzhak Rabin: Soldier, Leader, Statesman

by Itamar Rabinovich

Yale University Press, 272 pp., \$25.00; \$15.00 (paper)

Yitzhak Rabin addressing Israeli troops, Sidon, Lebanon, 1985

David Rubinger/Corbis/Getty Images

Yitzhak Rabin addressing Israeli troops, Sidon, Lebanon, 1985

The Israeli political system is in a weird stalemate. Two general elections in under six months have so far failed to produce a governing coalition. The sticking point is entirely personal—the fate of Benjamin Netanyahu as he faces multiple criminal indictments. After more than ten years in office, Netanyahu continues to dominate Israeli politics. As the recent election results show, this is not because he enjoys the support of a solid majority of voters, but because of the lack of a persuasive alternative. Israeli liberals are cowed by the right's political thuggery, demoralized by decades of failure, and weakened by mediocre leadership. Afraid to articulate their values and terrified of challenging Netanyahu's nationalism, many on the left have reverted to a meaningless centrism, assuming that the only way to defeat him is by offering a more civilized, noncorrupt version of his politics.

Thus the recent elections became a referendum on Netanyahu's divisive rhetoric, lavish lifestyle, and entanglement in various corruption scandals. But as Avner Inbar explained last spring:

Unlike his challengers in four consecutive elections, Netanyahu stands for something. While many Israelis find his actions and style odious, his opponents persistently fail to realize that in politics, a flawed something is still better than nothing.<sup>1</sup>

Two recent books recount the momentous events that began to shape this pattern almost a quarter-century ago.

Most Israelis above a certain age remember where they were on November 4, 1995, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was shot at a rally in Tel Aviv by an Israeli nationalist named Yigal Amir. I was on a bus, on my way to the rally. At the time, I was a soldier on unpaid leave, and attending political rallies was not my preferred pastime. I mostly wanted to hang out with my girlfriend, and I didn't particularly like Rabin. But in the fall of 1995, supporting the Oslo Accords, which broke a generations-long impasse by giving a measure of self-government to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, felt like a necessity.

Rabin had just signed the second Oslo agreement with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat that September, and the country was seething with opposition. For months, the spokespeople for the settlers in the occupied territories who sought to expand control over them had been ruthlessly attacking Rabin's government and flooding the streets with protesters. His supporters were in the majority and had until then largely sat out the demonstrations. But as dissent grew more vehement, with some openly calling for Rabin's elimination, the November 4 rally became a call to arms for defenders of the Oslo process.

"The announcement [of Rabin's death] plunged Israel into a haze, a gloomy twilight zone where everything seemed surreal," the journalist Dan Ephron recounts in *Killing a King*. There were tears and calls for dialogue, healing, and, above all, unity. Israelis who supported the Oslo Accords did not realize that these would become the sentimental instruments of their political defeat. In the following years the religious right, which had opposed peace with the Palestinians, came to dominate Israel's politics, while advocates of reconciliation—once the country's leading political force—were marginalized.

This was unimaginable at the time. The murder of the prime minister—a war hero and a venerated chief of staff—by a right-wing extremist might have been expected to mobilize his supporters and to undermine his opponents, who were viewed by many as having inspired it. While they did not call for or condone the murder, right-wing leaders had spared no rhetorical weapon in attacking Rabin. Stories circulated about his supposed military failings, alcoholism, mental illness, and even membership in satanic cults. But above all, he was branded a traitor.

The incitement against Rabin was not limited to the fringes. Palestinian opposition to the peace process set off an escalation in terror attacks and Israeli reprisals, and the leaders of the right-wing Likud party had no qualms about inflaming public passions in response to them. The right not only criticized the Rabin government's policy of seeking reconciliation with the Palestinians but also cast aspersions on its motives. Rabin was regularly compared to the Nazi

collaborators Vidkun Quisling and Philippe Pétain, and his government to the Judenräte (the Jewish councils that became a symbol of collusion with the Nazis). Netanyahu, Ephron writes, “aligned himself with the hardliners, the settlers and the rabble-rousers, speaking at rallies across the country where crowds branded Rabin a traitor and a murderer, and consorting with rabbis who’d urged soldiers to disobey evacuation orders” from territory ceded under the agreement. At one demonstration, Netanyahu was seen walking between a gallows and a coffin with the words “Zionism’s Murderer” on it.

Rhetoric aimed at delegitimizing the government and portraying its supporters as enemies of the people encouraged Rabin’s assassin, but Amir was a fanatic with a purpose. He believed that surrendering territory to Palestinian control was dangerous, and he recognized, as did the politicians of the right, that Rabin’s background in the military positioned him to garner public support for such a policy. As Amir later explained, “It was not a matter of revenge, or punishment or, god forbid, rage, but a matter of what stops [the peace process]. I thought a lot about it and realized that if I take out Rabin, this will stop it.”

For many Orthodox Jews, surrendering land to Arabs is not just a political mistake but a sin. Amir told the commission that investigated the assassination, “If I did not get the backing and I had not been representing many more people, I would not have acted.” By “backing,” he meant rulings by extremist rabbis that giving land to the Arabs violates religious law, for which the perpetrator should be executed. To the more religious members of the right Rabin was not only a traitor but an apostate, a rebel against God.

There was personal hatred too. With his unabashed secularism, common among early Zionists, Rabin contested the religious right’s self-conception as the heir to pre-state Zionist pioneers. The country’s first Jewish leader born in Palestine, Rabin was “the very embodiment of Israeliness,” as Ephron describes him. The dismissal of the religious right as “not a settlement movement” but “an unruly bunch” embracing “extremist chauvinism” by a leader of the state’s founding generation challenged the very basis of its claim to authority.

When Rabin was shot by a young man identified with the religious right, the reasonable assumption was that it would pay a heavy price. Netanyahu expected Likud and its allies on the right to “be decimated if elections are called soon.” The settlers were in a state of panic. With public opinion overwhelmingly against them, it seemed that Rabin’s Labor government would encounter no obstacles to reelection and the implementation of its peace policy.

Since then, however, Netanyahu has served as prime minister from 1996 to 1999 and again from 2009 to the present, leading the most right-wing government in Israel’s history, one dominated by the settlers and their supporters. The political interests identified with the nation’s most abhorred crime dominate its contemporary politics.

Ephron and Itamar Rabinovich both regard Rabin’s death as a critical moment in Israel’s history. More than twenty years later, there remains a baffling scarcity of literature about it, which makes

their books all the more important. Rabinovich's biography offers a clear-headed exposition of Rabin's public career. His account of the challenges and decisions Rabin grappled with throughout the peace process is informed by his personal involvement as Israel's ambassador to the United States and chief negotiator with Syria from 1993 to 1996, but he remains largely impartial. His verdict on the assassination's aftermath is sober: he faults the center and the left for allowing "the radical right and the settlers and their allies in Israel to remain entrenched, regroup, and get a stranglehold on the country's politics."

Ephron's book is a detailed, extensively researched account of the assassination and the events leading up to it. He presents the parallel stories of the assassin and his target: the national leader struggling to reach an agreement in the face of mounting terrorist attacks and intensifying public opposition, and the religious zealot who organized some of this opposition but quickly became disenchanted with democratic tactics. His turn to violence "set off a chain reaction that would shift the power in Israel from the pragmatists to the ideologues," Ephron writes. The question that neither he nor Rabinovich takes up is how this happened. Why did Israel's liberals abandon the political fight precisely at the moment when its urgency was more apparent than ever?

A dedicated soldier, Rabin was an unlikely leader of a peace movement. In 1948, as the twenty-six-year-old commander of the legendary Harel brigade, which fought in some of the fiercest battles of the Arab-Israeli war, including the battle for Jerusalem, Rabin was instrumental in the forced expulsion of Arabs from Lydda and Ramle. In 1967, as chief of staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), he was responsible for its most important victories in the Six-Day War, capturing the West Bank from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and Sinai from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. After the war he served as Israel's ambassador to the United States, and in 1974 became prime minister. Two years later, when an Air France flight from Tel Aviv to Paris was hijacked and rerouted to Entebbe in Uganda, Rabin chose not to negotiate for the lives of the 105 hostages. Instead, he ordered a rescue mission that would become one of the most renowned commando operations in Israel's history.

When the first intifada erupted in December 1987, Rabin, then minister of defense, attempted to crush it. It was rumored that he instructed Israeli troops to "break the bones" of Palestinian demonstrators, a rumor he consistently denied, though without convincing many people. Whether he gave this order or not, his approach was undeniably militant, and he made the same mistake that Israeli governments have repeatedly made: treating Palestinian resistance as a security issue rather than a political one and seeking to suppress it without addressing Palestinian grievances.

But by the middle of 1988, Rabin realized that force alone was futile and that a political settlement with the Palestinians was needed. Some believed that he could no longer remain blind to the similarities between the Palestinian struggle and the Jewish struggle for independence to which he had dedicated himself decades earlier. The transformation was evident when Rabin, known as Israel's "Mr. Security," declared, "Peace is made with enemies!"

The hard-line Likud prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, strongly opposed his position. In 1992 Rabin ran against Shamir on a peace platform and defeated him.

Once in office, Rabin gave priority to the peace process. “He felt that he had not been given a rare second chance just to spend several more years sitting in the prime minister’s chair and that changing Israel’s relationship with its Arab environment would be his most effective way of having an impact,” Rabinovich writes. Rabin was initially inclined to pursue negotiations with the Syrians first, appointing Rabinovich to lead the talks. While he offers few new revelations, his personal account provides a powerful confirmation of Rabin’s intentions. “It was clear from the start that Rabin intended to make meaningful headway in the peace process,” he writes. By August 1993, as he realized that a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights was essential for an agreement with Syria, Rabin authorized US Secretary of State Warren Christopher to propose it as part of a comprehensive peace plan. “I knew,” Rabinovich recalls, “Rabin had just given Christopher the keys to an Israeli–Syrian peace deal.” When Syrian president Hafez al-Assad declined his terms, Rabin decided to pursue agreements with the Palestinian Liberation Organization and with Jordan.

Rabin signed a peace treaty with Jordan’s King Hussein in October 1994, but he never reached a final agreement with Arafat, and it’s tempting to wonder: Would his maximum offer have met the minimum Palestinian demand? And if it had, would Rabin have managed to keep his coalition together and to secure public support despite the surge in Palestinian terrorism, which for many Israelis became a daily reality during the peace process? Rabinovich navigates the counterfactual with caution:

The assumption that Rabin would have won the 1996 elections is quite realistic, but that he would have come to an agreement with Arafat is less so.... Yet it is indeed likely that in the absence of a final status agreement Rabin would have nonetheless been able to settle on a less ambitious goal and to avoid a head-on collision on the scale of the Second Intifada.

The tragedy of Rabin’s murder was compounded by the fact that his legacy was left in the hands of his rivals—his foreign minister, Shimon Peres, and Netanyahu. Netanyahu was determined to disrupt the Oslo process. Peres, Rabin’s perennial nemesis in his own Labor Party, became acting prime minister after the assassination, but as a result of his vanity and envy of Rabin—whose popularity surged after his death—he sabotaged his own position. Peres decided not to hold elections immediately despite a decisive lead in the polls; when they were held a year later, he refrained from any mention of Rabin’s murder during the campaign, then with a string of strategic blunders he unwittingly helped Netanyahu distance himself from the assassination and restore his public image. In his 1979 memoir, Rabin had called Peres “an indefatigable subverter,” a label that stuck for many years. Peres’s gravest subversion of Rabin might well have been the rehabilitation of those who had inspired his assassin.

There were political mistakes and personal failings, and there was also the incessant bloodletting—Palestinian terror attacks in Israel and ill-conceived Israeli military operations in

Gaza and Lebanon. These events, recounted in both books, help to explain Netanyahu's victory, but the implosion of the Israeli center-left sprang from something deeper, which is crucial to understanding the lasting significance of Rabin's assassination.

On February 25, 1994, a settler in an IDF uniform walked into Hebron's Cave of Patriarchs, loaded his military-issued automatic rifle, and opened fire on hundreds of Muslims kneeling in prayer. Twenty-nine were killed and more than a hundred were injured. The gunman, Baruch Goldstein, an American-born physician, had been initiated into extremism in New York's Jewish Defense League and immigrated to Israel in 1983. He lived in Kiryat Arba, an extremist settlement on the edge of Hebron. Goldstein, who was beaten to death during the shooting, was given a hero's funeral in the settlement and was declared "holy" and "pure of heart" by its rabbis.

Appalled by the massacre and the celebration of its perpetrator, Rabin decided to evacuate some of the settlers from Hebron. Many in the security establishment and the government supported his decision, but then he changed his mind: the settlers had quickly mobilized and were threatening to fight the evacuation. Though their resistance could have easily been crushed, their readiness to use force gave rise to a cynical imperative: Rabin had to back down to avert *milhemet ahim*, a Hebrew term for civil war whose literal meaning invokes a powerful taboo, "war between brothers."

This was not Rabin's first encounter with the settlers. Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), the messianic movement that led the establishment of settlements in the territories captured in 1967, was formed in 1974. A few months earlier, Israel had suffered almost 10,000 casualties in the Yom Kippur War, which took it by surprise. Having been in power since the state's founding, the Labor Party had grown stale for many Israelis; it was tainted by corruption, and with the devastation of the war its promise of security was compromised. The religious nationalists of Gush Emunim, on the other hand, were full of passionate intensity.

In December 1975, shortly after Rabin was chosen to replace Labor's discredited prime minister, Golda Meir, hundreds of religious enthusiasts organized by Gush Emunim squatted in an old train station in Sebastia, near Nablus, in an attempt to force the government to establish a settlement in the heart of the West Bank. Rabin, who was a security realist but never a territorial expansionist, wanted to evict them, but the settlers were determined to stay. The threat of fraternal war, and the support of some in the government, led Rabin, in a compromise, to authorize a settlement called Kdumim.

In his memoir, Rabin disparaged the "professional fence-sitters who...smiled in every direction, proclaiming support for the government while conducting love-affairs with the outlaws of Gush Emunim."<sup>2</sup> He was referring primarily to Peres, the settlers' chief benefactor in the government. Unlike Peres, Rabin never flirted with the settlers. He considered Gush Emunim toxic to Israeli democracy and was openly hostile toward the settlers' messianic visions. But he was also reluctant to confront them. Rabinovich makes no apologies for Rabin:

The Sebastia affair was a turning point in several respects. It was a defining event in the history of Gush Emunim and the settlers' movement, leading to additional settlements in Samaria. It also exposed the weakness of Rabin and his government. It was a moment that called for a show of political courage and a determination that the Rabin of 1975 was still lacking.

Amos Oz put it more poignantly in 1989: "In the abandoned train station in Sebastia this cult brought Yitzhak Rabin to his knees, where he remained ever since. What is much worse, in Sebastia, the state of Israel too was brought to its knees, and it too has not yet managed to rise back up."

The justice minister at the time, Haim Zadok, called the Sebastia affair "the Altalena of 1975." The Altalena was a cargo ship carrying weapons for the right-wing pre-state underground organization Irgun. When the State of Israel was formed in 1948, David Ben-Gurion insisted that all military factions be subsumed under the IDF and that all weapons on board the Altalena be surrendered. Irgun's leader, Menachem Begin, refused, and Ben-Gurion ordered his forces in Tel Aviv—one of the officers there was Rabin—to open fire on the ship. Sixteen Irgun members and three IDF soldiers died, and the weapons were seized. This was an instance in which the threat of fraternal war did not deter confrontation.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews during an election campaign rally in Jerusalem for the Yahadut Hatorah party two days before the September 15, 2019, general elections

Menahem Kahana/AFP/Getty Images

Ultra-Orthodox Jews during an election campaign rally in Jerusalem for the Yahadut Hatorah (United Torah Judaism) party two days before the September 15, 2019, general elections

Reflecting on his career, Zadok commented in 2001, "Sebastia was our Altalena, but we did not have a Ben-Gurion." Confronted with mounting Palestinian terrorism, Rabin once said that Arafat needed his own Altalena moment. Yet Rabin himself, both in Sebastia and following the Hebron massacre, had failed to stand up to extremists on his own side. His assassination was an Altalena moment for his successors, and it too was not seized.

After Rabin's death, the opponents of the peace accord quickly distanced themselves from the assassin and pleaded for national unity. Many on the left wanted to believe that trauma had induced contrition. But the imperative of unity was invoked mainly to stifle reaction and criticism: this meant that the right could not be held accountable for inciting violence against the government, that its leaders were not answerable for their tactics, and that the religious authorities who sanctioned the assassination would not be prosecuted. Some shamelessly argued that the peace process had aggravated the country's divisions, as if blaming Rabin for his own death. Above all, the call to unity demanded that the assassination not be "politicized," which meant that the assassin's openly political cause—derailing the peace agreement—could not be mentioned.

Paralyzed by the threat of fraternal war and unable to resist the right's unity offensive, liberal Israelis surrendered the ability to define one of the nation's most fateful events. Public rage

evolved quickly into a sentimental carnival of grief. Melancholy ballads sung over candles became the trademark of Rabin's younger mourners, who became known as "the candle youth." Stripped of causes and consequences, his assassination and legacy were effectively purged of their political significance; the extremists who imposed their will by threat of force were no longer seen as the offenders, while those who criticized them and promoted "divisive" peace policies were; attackers became victims. The issue was no longer peace versus settlements, but keeping Israelis united. Many who had supported peace with the Palestinians struggled now to "connect" with religious nationalists.

The demand for unity was one-sided and short-lived. As the election approached, Netanyahu's campaign adopted the unmistakably racist slogan "Netanyahu is good for the Jews," and in May 1996 he narrowly defeated Peres and became prime minister. As soon as he was in power, Netanyahu abandoned pleas for unity. To this day, his government promotes racism, nativism, and xenophobia, increasingly undermines the free press, discredits the courts, infuses public education with nationalist indoctrination, persecutes human rights organizations, and vilifies the opposition. In the 2019 election campaign he aligned himself with a band of Jewish supremacists once outlawed for racism and shunned by all of his predecessors. Many of them venerate Baruch Goldstein and tacitly support Yigal Amir's actions.

Rabin's assassination was the starkest expression yet of the right's diktat to the Israeli mainstream: peace with your neighbors means war with your brothers. For more than two decades, Israeli advocates for peace and democracy have been paralyzed by this equation. The result is an asymmetrical culture war, with one side fighting tooth and nail while the other side—confused and intimidated—observes and repines. The taboo of fraternal war, which is rooted deep in the foundations of the Jewish state, has become the source of its undoing.

The new centrist party, Blue and White, performed impressively in both of the recent elections, winning the same number of seats as Netanyahu's Likud party (35 in April and 32 in September). But it refrains from taking a position on Israel's most pressing issues. Though by all accounts a liberal and a dove, its leader, former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz, would not commit to a two-state solution during the campaign or even concede that the occupation exists, but, submitting to the right's bigotry, announced that he would not include Arab parties in his coalition. Leading members of his party reiterated this position in August. If he had been elected and formed a coalition, Gantz's hastily assembled hodgepodge party would never have done anything that might provoke the right's wrath. Israel's liberals are still waiting for leaders who are neither intimidated by the right's bullying nor befuddled by its duplicitous cries for unity.

—October 9, 2019

1

Avner Inbar, "Netanyahu Keeps Winning Because His Opponents Lack a Vision for Israel," *World Politics Review*, May 3, 2019. ↵

2

My translation from Rabin's memoir, *Pinchas Sherut* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Maariv, 1979), p. 486. <sup>e</sup>