



Center for Israel Education

Shimon Peres

The Leadership Series



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1. Childhood and Early Years

"In Israel, a land lacking in natural resources, we learned to appreciate our greatest national advantage: our minds. Through creativity and innovation, we transformed barren deserts into flourishing fields and pioneered new frontiers in science and technology."

-Shimon Peres

Shimon Peres was born on August 2, 1923, in Wiszniew, Poland (now Vishnyeva, Belarus). His parents were Yitzhak and Sara Perski. Shimon's family spoke Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian at home. Shimon also learned Polish at school. His father was a wealthy timber merchant, and his mother was a librarian. Peres had a younger brother named Gershon.

His grandfather, Rabbi Zvi Meltzer, impacted his life greatly. Peres discussed his memories with his grandfather:

"As a child, I grew up in my grandfather's home. ... I was educated by him.... My grandfather taught me Talmud."

In 1932, when Peres was 9 years old, his father immigrated to Tel Aviv, in the Land of Israel. In 1934, Shimon and his family followed their father.



Peres at age 13

Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Shimon grew up in Tel Aviv and attended Ben Shemen Youth Village and Agricultural Boarding School in Central Israel. He attended college in America, at the New School and New York University. He then continued his education with a degree in Advanced Management at Harvard University.

When he returned to Israel, he met Sonia Gelman. They got married in May 1945. They had three children: Zvia, Yoni, and Chemi. Peres later spent several years at Kibbutz Geva and Kibbutz Alumot, of which he was one of the founders.



Kibbutz Geva (1944)

Source: Kluger Zoltan, National Photo Collection



Peres (standing, third from right) with his family

Source: [public domain](#)

2. Early Professional Life

"Israel has its attractions. It's the most dramatic country in the world. Everybody's engaged. Everybody argues. When I leave Israel, I get a little bit bored, you know?" -Shimon Peres

In 1947, joined the Haganah, which would later become the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). He was put in charge of arms purchases and managing manpower. After the 1948 War of Independence in Israel, he went on to serve as the Head of Naval Services in the IDF.

Shimon Peres was a critical leader in Israel's early years, during a time filled with many obstacles. He initially headed the Defense Ministry's delegation to the United States and not long afterward was appointed Director-General of the Ministry of Defense. The Ministry of Defense is the governmental department responsible for protecting Israel from all internal and external threats.

Yitzhak Rabin later said in his memoirs that he felt he had made a mistake by choosing Peres as Defense Minister. Rabin said:

"I did not consider Peres suitable, since he had never fought in the [army] and his expertise in arms purchasing did not make up for that lack of experience."

Despite his lack of field combat experience, Peres is credited with building a strong political and military relationship between Israel and France. This led to France's sale of tanks, advanced planes, jet planes, and cannons to Israel in 1952.

He also helped establish Israel's nuclear program, largely the result of French aid and technology. Israel established its nuclear program as a deterrent to the threat of many enemy nations surrounding it.



Ben-Gurion, Peres, and others at a ceremony

Source: Pridan Moshe, National Photo Collection

3. Climbing the Ranks

"When you have two alternatives, the first thing you have to do is look for the third that you didn't think about, that doesn't exist" -Shimon Peres



Nepal King Mahendra visits Israel with Shimon Peres, Defense Ministry, and Airforce Commander Ezer Weizman (1958)

Source: public domain ([details](#)).

In 1959, Shimon Peres was elected to the Israeli parliament, called the Knesset. The Knesset has 120 members and is the national legislature in Israel. Unlike in America, which has both the House and Senate, in Israel, there is only one legislative body: the Knesset.

Also, in Israel, there is both a president and prime minister. The prime minister is the primary leader of the state and of the Knesset. The president serves in a mostly ceremonial role. The president's most important job is to help form the government.

Over his long tenure in the Knesset, Peres has served in all of the following jobs: Minister of Immigrant Absorption, Transportation, Finance, and Foreign Affairs.

He was one of Israel's key innovators and entrepreneurs. He looked at issues from multiple perspectives and had lots of drive and determination. As a *chalutz* חלוץ (pioneer), he was proud to be a dreamer and visionary. He understood the vitality of technology to the future of the state and supported the establishment of the Computer and Information Systems Center. His efforts led to the purchase of the IDF's first computer.



Source: Harnik Nati, National Photo Collection

4. The Oslo Accords



Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Rabin

Source: Saar Yaacov, [GPO](#), [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#) license

In the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel launched a defensive war against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in response to aggressive moves by its neighboring countries. Through this war, Israel gained control over eastern Jerusalem for the first time, including the Old City. Jews prayed at the Kotel for the first time since the establishment of Israel.

Israel also gained control over the Golan Heights, Gaza, the West Bank, and the Sinai Peninsula. As a small nation, this was a big victory for Israel. However, it also meant that Israel became responsible for a predominately Arab population in the West Bank and Gaza who did not want to be controlled by Israel.

In 1969, Peres became the Minister of Immigrant Absorption and in 1970, the Minister of Transportation and Communications. In 1974, he became Minister of Defense in Yitzhak Rabin's government. Peres continued to challenge Rabin, seeking to gain control of the Mapai party, but in 1977 lost to Rabin in party elections. In 1984, Peres finally became Israel's 8th Prime Minister. He became Defense Minister, with Rabin taking the position of Prime Minister, in 1986.

Israeli Foreign Minister Peres, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, with some mediation by American President Bill Clinton, met secretly in Oslo, Norway, beginning in 1993. They aimed to come up with a compromise so that Jews and Arabs could live in peace, side by side. It was done in Norway to keep the negotiations secret because many Israelis and Palestinians were against peace talks and the possibility of giving up some of their land. However, the secret talks ultimately led to the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1994, which laid the foundation for future resolutions to the conflict. The Oslo Accords aimed to:

"establish a Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority, the elected Council, (the "Council") for the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip."

As a result of their efforts, Peres, Rabin, and Arafat were all awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994. The Norwegian Nobel Committee stated in a press release that their political activism

“called for great courage on both sides, and which has opened up opportunities for a new development towards fraternity in the Middle East. It is the Committee’s hope that the award will serve as an encouragement to all the Israelis and Palestinians who endeavor to establish lasting peace in the region.”



Peres (R), Clintons, Rabins, King Hussein, others at The White House after signing Oslo 2 | Source: Ohayon Avi, National Photo Collection



(R-L) Arafat, President Clinton, King Hussein, Egyptian President Mubarak and Prime Minister Rabin fix ties before Oslo 2 signing at the White House | Source: White House Photographer, National Photo Collection

5. The Peres Center for Peace

"Making peace is not a simple endeavor. It is a constant struggle. But its complexity should not overshadow its purpose." -Peres



Source: Milner Moshe, National Photo Collection

In 1996, Shimon Peres founded the Peres Center for Peace and Innovation, an organization dedicated to promoting a *"prosperous Israel"* and paving the way forward *"for shared-living and lasting peace in the region."* The Center has received numerous awards since its founding, including the 2010 Peace and Sports Award for best non-governmental organization. The organization has programs in innovation, sports, cultivation of leadership and entrepreneurship, health, business, and environment.



The opening of the Peres Center for Peace

Source: Milner Moshe, National Photo Collection

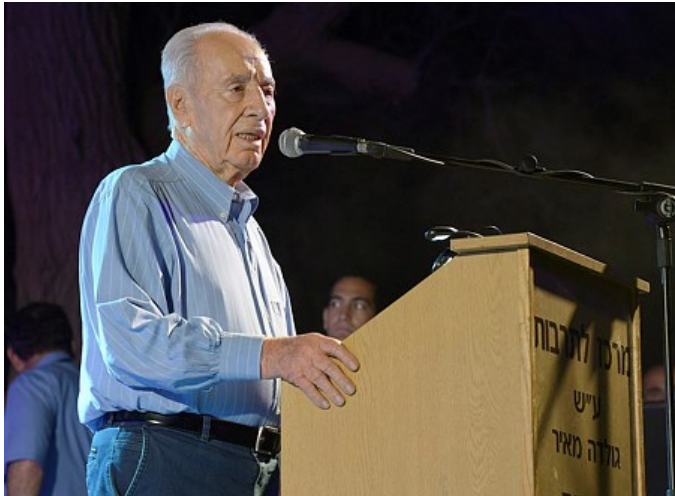


Peres examining tomatoes at Sdot Negev Regional Council, near Gaza

Source: National Photo Collection

6. His Final Years in Politics

"You don't make peace with friends. You make it with very unsavory enemies." -Peres



Source: National Photo Collection

In 2007, Shimon Peres became the ninth president of Israel. He had served 48 consecutive years in the Knesset, more years than anybody else in Israeli history. In his new role as President, Peres continued to promote peace between Israel and her neighbors, a constant struggle in the region. He also frequently met with foreign leaders and heads of international organizations.

He was a well-respected President by many leaders around the world. Former President Barack Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in June 2012. Obama said of Peres:

"[i]n him, we see the essence of Israel itself — an indomitable spirit that will not be denied."

On his 90th birthday in 2013, he gave a speech: *"We long for peace with our neighbors. The yesterday between us and the Palestinians is full of sadness. I believe that the Israel of tomorrow and the Palestine of tomorrow can offer our children a ray of hope. The advancement of peace will complete the march of Israel towards the fulfillment of its founding vision."*

In 2014, Peres finished his seven-year term as President. In his farewell speech, he said, I *"am saying goodbye to my role as President, but not to my obligation as a citizen."* One year later, he finished his last major project: the establishment of the Innovation Center as part of the Peres Center.

7. His Passing and Legacy

On September 28, 2016, Shimon Peres passed away at the age of 93. His funeral was attended by foreign leaders from around the world, including former Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, and European diplomats. Bill Clinton spoke about Shimon Peres, saying *"[he] started off life as Israel's brightest student, became its best teacher, and ended up its biggest dreamer."*

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu eulogized Peres at his funeral, ending saying: *"Shimon, my friend, you said that one of the few times you shed a tear was when you heard the tragic news of the death of my brother Yoni in Entebbe. You cried then, Shimon. And today, I weep for you. I loved you. We all love you."*

He also detailed how he and Peres worked together despite it being *"no secret that Shimon and I were political rivals, but over time we became friends, close friends."*

The American Jewish Committee (AJC), a global Jewish advocacy organization, released a statement mourning Shimon Peres.

AJC CEO David Harris said:

"Peres had extraordinary energy, boundless optimism, and future-oriented vision, not only about the possibilities of peace and coexistence in the region, but also about the exciting pathways of new technologies for the benefit of humankind—from nano-science to mapping the brain."



President Peres welcomes Pope Benedict XVI as he lands in Israel (2009)

Source: Amos Ben Gershom, National Photo Collection

8. Other Notable Quotes by Peres

"You are as great as the cause you serve and as young as your dreams."

"I believe that the next decade will be the most surprising decade yet, maybe we will penetrate the greatest mystery of all: the code of the existence of man and the secret story of human creativity."

"Israeli children should be taught to look to the future, not live in the past. I would rather teach them to imagine than to remember."



Shimon Peres and Chief of General Staff Benny Gantz in the Golan Heights

Source: Mark Neyman, National Photo Collection

"It's better to be controversial for the right reasons than to be popular for the wrong reasons."

"If you eat three times a day you'll be fed but if you read three times a day you'll be wise."

"In Israel, a land lacking in natural resources, we learned to appreciate our greatest national advantage: our minds. Through creativity and innovation, we transformed barren deserts into flourishing fields and pioneered new frontiers in science and technology."

"Find a cause that's larger than yourself and then give your life to it."

"You're as young as your dreams, not as old as your calendar."

"The most careful thing is to dare."

"I learned that public service is a privilege that must be based on moral foundations."

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Peres with U.S. President Bill Clinton at the White House (1996)

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