

Why Late Israeli President Shimon Peres Was a True Friend to Evangelical Christians

Many a time, I have been asked how an evangelical Christian could feel so strongly about Israel's late President Shimon Peres. Earnestly, it is because I had a privileged close bond with this great man. I have been honored to have Peres serve as the international chairman of the Friends of Zion Heritage Center and have traveled the world advocating peace with him. The vision and purpose of the FOZHC is to share the stories of non-Jews who have contributed to the protection and development of the Jewish people and the state of Israel—in many cases, even risking their own lives to do so.

Who Peres was, and all that he stood for, exemplified him as a perfect delegate and representative of the FOZHC dream. Having had Peres as a partner was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that has left me with unlimited inspiration and determination. The stories I could share about my hero, Shimon Peres, are countless, and each incrementally raised my respect for and friendship with him.

I remember the first time we presented the Friends of Zion Award, the FOZHC's highest honor that is only bestowed unto those who have gone "above and beyond" for the state of Israel and the Jewish people. It was in 2015, and Peres and I had flown to Dallas, Texas, to give the award to the United States' 43rd president, George W. Bush.

Looking back, it was a very humorous start for such a grand award presentation. The moment the elevator opened, we saw President Bush waiting to greet us with a huge Texas grin on

his face. The first words that came out of his mouth were addressing Peres, and he said, "Wow, you are really old. I bet you are older than my father."

Peres, with his smiling and twinkling eyes, responded with: "Yes, I am one year older than your father."

President Bush continued with the banter, saying, "I bet all of your friends are dead."

Not missing a beat, Peres humbly replied, "No, I have many friends."

In that moment, two great leaders who were raised thousands of miles apart met and were instantaneously friends. This was just one of Peres' magical qualities.

After the award was presented, Peres and I proceeded to have dinner. At the table, he turned and asked me with his glowing smile: "What were your last two dreams?" This was a common question for Peres to ask. He loved it when people dreamed big and to hear the goals that others were inspired to accomplish.

I told him the truth. My grandest dreams of the time were to have him as my international chairman and to be with him when the first "Friends of Zion Award" was bestowed on President George W. Bush.

Shimon Peres laughed and said, "It seems to me that you need to dream some more now."

The story of this tremendous and instantaneous bond between Peres and President Bush was not just a one-time event. The very same friendship happened when we met with Prince Albert II of Monaco and presented him with the Friends of Zion Award. Peres had a magnetic personality that compared to none.

The night in Monaco is one of my fondest memories. There was a *bar mitzvah*, the coming of age for Aaron G. Frenkel's son, and the celebrations were grand. Peres spoke with Frenkel as he

did with the prince and the president: with respect, kindness and a warm smile. Like an ancient sage, Peres told Frenkel the story of Joseph from the Bible and added his own amazing perspective to the story. It was clear to me that Frenkel knew he experienced something rare from the conversation with Peres, which will stay with him forever. Peres always knew how to make others comfortable by knowing exactly what to say.

Another milestone with Peres occurred when we met with Pope Francis. From the moment we began the audience with the pope, it was very clear that he had a shining admiration for Peres.

One of the first things Peres did was introduce me to the pope by saying, "Michael was named after his great-grandfather, Rabbi Michael Katznelson. Rabbi Katznelson was burned to death in his synagogue along with 2,000 other Jews." The pope in turn asked me in English how a Jewish man came to the following of Jesus Christ and Christianity. Peres urged me to tell my story.

I told the pope that my mother did not like Christians. Even when I was very young, she would tell me that Christians hated Jews and persecuted them. She would make statements grouping Billy Graham, Adolf Hitler and the pope together—as if to say that all were untrustworthy by association. And at the time, I could understand from where her opinion was founded. It was from my professing Christian father who raised me as a Christian but was also an anti-Semite of the lowest form.

On Friday nights, my father would come home drunk and beat my mother. He would shout at her: "You are a Jewish [obscenity] and that boy upstairs is not my son—He is a [obscenity]." He would unfoundedly accuse her of having an affair with a Jewish man. My mother would fear such nights and would assume that all Christians were as my father was.

At 11, I gathered enough courage to stand up to my father and to try to defend my mother. On one of the Friday nights, I

screamed at him to stop attacking her. He ran up the stairs and began to strangle me, lifting me up above his head by my neck. I passed out, and when I came to, I was in the fetal position on the floor. I was lucky to be alive.

From that horrible day, I learned two things: One, my father did not represent the proper path of Christianity and two, that at the age of 11, I could not protect even one Jew, my very own mother, but in the future, I would defend all of the Jewish people.

When I finished my account, I had tears streaming down my face. I looked up and noticed that both Peres and the pope were also crying. These great men of peace had the power to sympathize with my story that would leave others in silent shock.

Over dinner that evening, I had the opportunity to hear Peres' life story, and he told me about a connection I did not make before. He started by telling me that there is a G-d, and I asked him why he would suddenly say that. He said to me, "Michael, I researched you and your great-grandfather who was burned to death. My own grandfather was the cantor rabbi in the synagogue and also died in that fire. Only G-d could have brought us together."

I told Peres that we needed to have a book memorializing our ancestry of the two rabbis and the wooden synagogue.

Aside from sharing a family connection in history, Peres trusted me with facts and stories of today. At that dinner in Rome, he asked me what I wanted to talk about tonight.

"You can't tell me," I said, "I want to talk about Dimona."

For the next hour and a half, Peres told me how he pioneered Israel's nuclear program, despite several times having his adviser interrupt with "Mr. President, these are state secrets." Peres would just continue by saying "Don't worry,

Michael could keep a secret.”

Despite all the happy memories, the story of Peres being brought to the hospital will always be imprinted as one of the saddest days of my life. It was on that day we were to meet in person about compiling that book on our joint history.

I went to the hospital to grieve and pray for my dear friend and beloved hero, Shimon Peres. Yona Bartal, executive director of the Peres Circle at the Peres Center for Peace and Innovation, was always by his side and told me that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had called three times to update about the top doctors from around the world called to assist. Tragically, none would make it in time.

I lost a dear friend and mentor on that day. Peres believed in me and in my vision. He was gracious, kind and considerate. What he accomplished for the state of Israel and the Jewish people is absolutely astonishing and will be remembered throughout history. I will conclude with this: Peres was a beloved man and all those who knew him loved him. I am one of those who had the privilege and honor of knowing him.

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