

The Shattering of a Dream - Cry my Beloved Country

Kikar Malkei Israel (Kings of Israel Square) is next to the City Hall in Tel Aviv and a stone`s throw from famous Dizengoff Street. When not used for protest rallies or other gatherings, it is an open space of white paved cement slabs, decorated with a few palm trees. At any time of the day or night there are people crossing it from every direction which gives it the feeling of a well-used board game.

In summer, students come out in the evenings to walk their dogs and couples chat on benches. A devoted group of frisbee players takes over one corner. There are coffee -shops, pet-stores, banks, furniture showrooms, clothes-shops and restaurants all around the square. Buses, cars zoom along the streets bordering on the square making for a high noise level.

The *Kikar malkei Israel* is probably the most emotional venue in the city where over the years, tears have been shed, peace songs sung in protest to War, where fiery speeches have been made. A successful rally is one where the number of protesters reaches tens of thousands. The accuracy of those attending is often disputed by reporters on either side.

In September 1993, Rabin and Arafat signed the Oslo peace treaty in Washington. After decades of conflict, their handshake was uneasy. An official framework for the future relations between the Palestinians and the Israelis had been established. Sixty percent of the population supported the dialogue. On both sides there was strong opposition. The feathers of the right-wing Israelis had been ruffled. They mistrusted the Palestinians, their leader, Arafat and viewed the agreement as a manipulation to gain a respite before the next stage of violence. The continuing terrorist attacks on the Israeli civilian population immediately following the agreement was ample evidence of this.

The Palestinians rejected the accords for different reasons. They were not prepared to recognize the State of Israel. There was a feeling that the Israelis were not going to dismantle the settlements around Jerusalem.

Tension in the country was mounting. There was growing concern for both our Prime Minister`s safety and that of the Agreement. At a gathering of English-speaking immigrants a few weeks before the rally, Rabin was attacked by some extreme Settlers. Security around him was stepped up. Protestors gathered in the evenings at his apartment block in northern Tel Aviv chanting their threats at their leader for betraying his people.

On the 4th November, the advocates of peace planned a rally in Tel Aviv to express collective support. It was a clear, cool evening. No sign of long-awaited rain.

That Saturday, we decided to attend the rally. Civil protests were not part of my upbringing in apartheid South Africa. All forms of protest to the doctrine of the ruling party were banned and punishable. For me the right to protest was one of the greatest gifts I received when I left the land of my birth. I was even prepared to sit on the back of Shamir's Vespa, clinging to him while looking up at the sky. The sight of the tar road beneath me felt threatening. We wove our way to the Square.

"I've never seen so many people. Look at that wave coming up the street", said Shamir.

It was quite amazing. There were supporters from the north, from kibbutzim, from the development towns in the south, children in youth movement uniforms, fathers with babies on their shoulders, in prams; the old, the young, invalids and army veterans. We parked the bike and joined the crowds.

One hundred thousand people filled the Square that night!

"I hope there isn't a fanatic suicide bomber here", I muttered out loud.

We had been living through a nightmare period of terrorist attacks. Without warning, people were being killed instantly in violent bomb explosions. I feared for my children's lives as they boarded buses to school. I took note of suspicious objects or persons wherever I was. I checked for clues; a sweaty anxious face, someone a heavy bag on a shoulder; my instincts sharpened, sure that I'd identify a potential suicide bomber were I to see one.

There were tight security checks at all the entrances to the square. Metal detectors were stroked down our backs, my bag squeezed to judge its contents. We were used to these measures. They comforted us.

Shamir and I pushed our way through the dense crowd and reached the front rows holding hands as we did, so as not to be separated. All around us, balloons, banners, echoing voices from the public speakers all over the square. I heard snippets of comments as we passed, some inane, others joking. Many were silent, saving up their energy for the main addresses of the evening.

We could see the broad ledge where the speakers stood above the crowds. We watched Rabin make his speech. There was cheering, clapping, whistles and smiles all around. The crowd was excited and supportive. He then joined in the singing of the song for Peace.

"He doesn't have much of a voice, does he?"

I had managed to keep my gaze on Rabin through the gap formed by a couple`s heads in-front of me. By now, my lips were dry. I sipped some water from the small plastic bottle I'd brought with me.

I felt I could breathe again. The evening had been a success. There were foreign reporters on vans all around the square, broadcasting to their countries.

"I think it`s going to be Ok," I whispered to Shamir.

"Come, let`s go before the crowd does" he said.

I was reluctant, but we left. We arrived home, made some coffee and watched a movie in the living-room.

Suddenly the program was interrupted by 'breaking news'. Back we were at the rally; there had been a shot; confusion all around. People were shouting, some lifted their hands to their faces, others up in the air. There was a momentary break in the broadcast. The reporter re-appeared, his face pale, his composure cracked.

"I`m afraid there`s been an attack, we don`t yet know what`s happened. Yes, it`s Rabin, he`s been shot and taken away to Ichilov Hospital".

The Prime Minister had left the rally by the steps behind the platform. A young, slim, dark-haired, Israeli was waiting, in the shadows, armed.

The knot in my stomach had returned. The coffee went cold as I froze in my seat.

Before long, an official announcement was made that Rabin had been assassinated by the bullet of a fanatic Jew. The three fired shots fired had met their mark.

Shamir went onto the balcony his tears filling with eyes. For days on end the children filled the square, lit candles, cried, sang together, wrote on the walls of the City Hall building. They mourned not only for their leader, but for the end of a dream, the dashing of the hopes of a nation. And this, brought about by the son of a pre-school teacher.

I was distraught.

How were we to continue from here?

A sense of hopelessness pervaded our homes, our lives, our hearts and minds. The square was renamed: "Rabin`s Square". The walls were cleaned of the children`s graffiti; a permanent memorial at the corner of the Square was laid down. There are still frisbee games in summer and students walking their dogs. There are still political rallies and rallies of a social nature, summer music concerts and religious ceremonies in Rabin`s Square.

For all this, the indelible stain of the blood of a nation`s leader has yet to be removed from between the cracks of the cement slabs at the foot of the steps behind the City Hall.

The Shattering of a Dream by Gail Loon Lustig

Written in 1996

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