

The rivalry between Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin and its impact on the defeat of the Labor Party in the 1977 elections

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Abstract

The personal rivalry between Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin began in the 1950s, while in the late 1970s it reached its peak. This rivalry, along with other reasons, influenced public opinion in Israel and contributed to the defeat of the Labor Party in the 1977 elections. This article describes and analyzes the complex relationship between the two leaders and its influence.

Keywords: Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Rabin, Labor party, Elections, Ma'arakh party, Upheaval

Introduction

Many reasons, including social, economic and security, led in May 1977 to the collapse of the ruling hegemony of the Israeli Labor Party.¹ In the Ninth Knesset, the Party suffered a stinging defeat and was pushed to the opposition benches, While Menachem Begin, head of the Likud party, reached to the position of the Prime Minister. One of the reasons for the party's defeat was the intense and incessant internal conflicts within the party, which, among other things, paralyzed its mechanism and made it hated in the eyes of the Israeli public, disputes that lasted from the early 1960s until the eve of the fateful election. In the 1970s, the conflict between Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, both from the young generation of the party that sought to continue the path of founders of the party, was particularly noticeable. This conflict, which dates back to the 1950s, was regularly reviewed in the Israeli media, especially in the print media, and had an impact on the party's status and ability to continue to lead the Israeli political system. This article deals with the roots of the conflict, its content and essence, its coverage by the Israeli media and its impact on the May 1977 election results.

A number of scholars have previously discussed relations between Rabin and Peres, but none of them attributed the 1977 defeat to the party's harsh rivalry and to the unsettled relations between the two leaders' camps. Michael Bar-Zohar, Peres' biographer, claimed that their relationship was unsettled, and emphasized that Yitzhak Rabin even hated Peres "crazy hatred", in his words.² Bar-Zohar even claimed that Rabin did not see Shimon Peres as a worthy candidate for prime minister.³ Another researcher, Meron Medzini, claimed that Golda Meir, who was in favor of Yitzhak Rabin, "did not respect Shimon Peres and did not consider him a candidate for the most senior position".⁴ Sociologist Samuel Eisenstadt explained that the political upheaval of 1977 stemmed from social tensions and the disintegration of the

hegemonic institutional patterns of the labor movement as well as the impact of the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War.⁵ He did not address the internal tensions in the party at all. Historian Anita Shapira claimed that the Yom Kippur War was the momentous event that brought about the demise of Labor movement rule. But she also claimed that the internal struggles between Peres and Rabin and the cases of corruption exposed during this period damaged the Labor party further.⁶

The conflict began in the 1950s, when Rabin and Peres began to make their way to the top of Israel's security leadership. At the end of December 1953, both received significant advances, one on the civilian track and the other on the military track. In April 1959, Rabin was appointed Chief of the Operations Division and in 1961 was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff. Shimon Peres was appointed Deputy Minister of Defense in December 1959 and during his tenure, Israel developed the "Shavit 2" rocket that was mainly used for deterrence against Egypt, as a course of psychological warfare.

The journalist Uri Dan, who accompanied the two for many years, claimed that the arguments between them during this period "did not go out" because their publication was blocked by the severe military censorship, "but they revolved around military and personal issues".⁷ Dan argued that when there were debates about submarine procurement or equipment for the Air Force, Peres and Rabin often found themselves in opposing positions, when each attempted to harness the chief of staff or the commander of the air force to his side. Shimon Peres sought to encourage relations with France, where he established ties with the security leadership while Rabin argued that American orientation should be developed. In January 1963, Shimon Peres almost succeeded in torpedoing Rabin's appointment as chief of staff when he claimed to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion that Rabin was "hesitant" and that in his appointment to the high military role "the army is handed over to a party organization".⁸ Ben-Gurion, according to his biographer Michael Bar-Zohar, liked Rabin from the days of the War of Independence. Ben Gurion's retirement in June 1963 and Levi Eshkol's tenure as prime minister strengthened Rabin's military and political standing and he found a common language with Eshkol in every matter he had disagreement with Peres. In the Mapai split in 1965, when Ben-Gurion and his younger generation's supporters, including Peres and Moshe Dayan founded Rafi, Rabin found himself politically affiliated with Eshkol. This situation further deepened the gap between Rabin and Peres. Zvi Dinstein who replaced Peres in the post of Deputy Minister of Defense since 1966 and Eshkol were inexperienced in the field of security and relied on Rabin who actually became the actual Minister of Defense.

What was the source of the disruptive relationship between Rabin and Peres? In principle, there were some natural causes for this tension. With the establishment of the Rabin government in 1974, a situation was first created in Israel where the prime minister is a former military officer, rich in

experience and with authoritative status in this area, while the Defense Minister Peres is a civilian, with much experience in the security system, but mainly on the civilian-economical side. When forming the government, Rabin preferred to entrust the security ministry in Yigal Allon's hands and the foreign affairs ministry to Peres, but Peres and Rafi opposed it, and without Rafi it was impossible to form a government. A second source of the tension was the small difference in the vote between the two in the run for office. The fear of re-dealing would have disappeared had Rabin succeeded in creating an unquestionable status as party leader, but he failed to do so. Another source to the tension stemmed from the disagreement between Rabin and Peres regarding Israel's approach to the territories occupied by the IDF during the Six-Day War. While Rabin supported the principle of territorial compromise with Jordan according to the principles of the "Allon Plan"⁹, Peres supported the "functional compromise" approach that advocated a Jewish settlement on Mountain Range (Samaritan). Rabin even claimed that Peres acted contrary to the government's policy, while encouraging settling everywhere.

Rabin described the murky relationship between them later in his autobiographical book "Service Book" (Pinkas Sherot). According to Rabin, the two had a long history of hostility. Rabin wrote that in 1974, when Golda retired as prime minister, Shimon Peres, at their meeting at a Jerusalem restaurant luncheon, asked him for a "gentlemanly agreement" for fair dealing that would determine that no matter who is going to win - the other one will accept that and will act subordinate to him. Rabin, who agreed, wrote: "Already then I knew Peres and his character. I couldn't believe his word. I decided that if Peres was elected prime minister, I will stay out of his government". In another chapter in a book called "Disputes at the Top," Rabin called Peres "indefatigable subversive" and wrote that Peres, who lost to Rabin in the internal elections in the party in April 1974, never gave up the desire to be prime minister. According to Rabin, Peres was of the opinion that there was only one barrier between him and the prime minister: Yitzhak Rabin. "He wanted to get me out of his way and to swear allegiance to the Knesset as prime minister," Rabin wrote in his book, which caused much discomfort to his opponent. Dov Goldstein, who wrote with Rabin the book later stated that Rabin's attitude to Peres can be described as "crazy hatred".¹⁰ Many members of the party, including Rabin's supporters, saw in the book, as well as in the rivalry between the two, an obstacle to the party's success.

On August 12, 1979, two years after the political upheaval, and some time before the publication of the book, when only a few sections of it were published on television and shook the party and mainly damaged it, a discussion was held on the book at the Labor Party meeting. Rabin and Peres were present and the tension was great. "I do not see room for discussion about a friend's right to write what he thinks and feels," Rabin stated at the opening of the meeting.¹¹ "We don't need your approval on what to discuss," Peres replied stating: "A new political situation was created that cannot be

ignored."¹² Moshe Baram, the former minister of labor in the Rabin government, said in the meeting to Rabin that "You said the truth should be told. With the truth, much can be destroyed". Former Education Minister Aharon Yadlin argued that "the topic of the debate is how to conquer the suicide desire that attacks us from time to time".¹³ Knesset Member Moshe Shahal, later Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, added: "Not only is the public tired of this ongoing personal debate, many within the party are not interested in continuing the debate."¹⁴

There were quite a few incidents in the conflict between the two, the most prominent of which was the appointment of Arik Sharon in 1975 as the prime minister's security adviser, which was interpreted as a kind of expression of distrust in the defense minister and the chief of staff. Since then there have been ups and downs in the relationship between the two and the main loser has been the Labor Party. The problematic relationship in the government damaged the image of the ruling party and voices began to be heard, even among the party's loyalists, who thought it was better for the party to freshen up on the opposition benches. The Likud sought to take advantage of this moment of weakness of the Labor Party, and on May 13, 1976, Knesset member Moshe Nissim put forward a proposal to discuss the Knesset's agenda regarding the functioning of the government in light of the relationship between the prime minister and the defense minister. The offer was rejected.

This rivalry, in the years 1974-1977 between Rabin and Peres, burdened the party the most, which also suffered from other ills, including a deep budget crisis and the loss of an ideological path. Following the reconciliation conversation between the two in May 1976, the flame diminished, but both inside and outside the party, the general impression was that the conflict between the two was so deep that there was no room for talk about its absolute settlement, but at most about its temporary cooling. "This is not a dispute between the two. It is a dispute that tears the heart and soul of the Labor Party", Knesset member Yitzhak Ben-Aharon stated.¹⁵ "This is a conflict that has much deeper roots than can be seen [...] I predict a greater deterioration in the party's credibility among the public and among the members of the government themselves. This is a deterioration that may well jeopardize the party's position in the next election," said Knesset member Mordechai Ben Porat.¹⁶ He even argued that past party disputes had never reached such proportions and that part of the blame lay on the shoulders of the accessible media that intensifying the rivalry: "the culture of debate was different. In the past, conflicts tended to remain in limited frameworks between individuals whose sole purpose was: the realization of a particular ideology in favor of the state. Newspapers and media were not involved in the conflicts [...] Today all of these are involved in the conflict and they inflate it. The conflict today is becoming a public domain. That is the seriousness of the problem".¹⁷ Knesset member Yossi Sarid claimed that in his opinion the conflict "is nothing but a personal rivalry that tries to equate itself with the

nature of substantive disagreements". Dr. Ehud Shprintsak of the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University stated that "the party should be very concerned" from several reasons, the main of which is the undermining of its public status as a result of the open personal conflict between its two senior leaders, therefore, the Labor Party should have an interest in extinguishing the fire as quickly as possible and removing the matter from the headlines.¹⁸

The impressive military operation in Entebbe in July 1976, during which the IDF released more than 100 Israeli passengers and crew members who were abducted by terrorists on an Air France plane en route from Tel Aviv to Paris via Athens, also became part of the Rabin-Peres conflict. The team members of the two began to publicly argue over which of the two leaders initiated the operation and who gave the final instruction to carry it out.¹⁹ Rabin then began to make the argument, repeating it in his autobiographical book, according to which Peres' part in the operation was marginal, even interfering. At that point, Peres told Transportation Minister Gad Yaakobi that it was clear to him that relations with Rabin had reached a "crossroads". "I will not be able to be a member of the government headed by Rabin," he said.²⁰ At a meeting on Rabin's autobiography in 1979, former Justice Minister Haim Tzadok referred to the Entebbe issue and claimed that "Shimon was from the first moment the driving force behind the military operation. Yitzhak was the one who made things difficult".²¹

The media coverage of the conflict between Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres was different from the coverage of other political issues, because it included personal passions, a sharp and uncompromising interpersonal struggle in a style that Israeli politics did not recognize before. Although there have been sharp conflicts between politicians in the past, such as the conflict between Ben-Gurion and Pinchas Lavon, Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharet and Ben-Gurion against Levy Eshkol and Golda Meir, the new generation of politicians was influenced by world politics and political rivalries defined until the 1960s as ideological conflicts, became from the mid-1970s personal conflicts, ego wars and honor. The daily newspapers, including Maariv, Yedioth Ahronoth and Davar, dealt with the affair on two levels at the same time: one, on the serious level, as an influential and meaningful political conflict that its consequences may affect the country. The conflict made headlines in the daily press and the best political commentators referred to it and its significance. The second, on the gossip-satirical level, as a kind of secondary event in its importance, which the journalistic reference to is critical-satirical. The interaction between the media and the political system is full of tension by its very nature, and due to the democratic nature of the regime in Israel, the daily newspapers could take the conflict in different, sometimes opposing directions, and to report it once as influential news and once as a ridiculous secondary event, presenting the Israeli leadership in its misery.

The first Rabin government: "Passions are heating up"

In the elections to the Eighth Knesset, which took place on December 31, 1973, about two months after the Yom Kippur War, Ma'arakh party (the Labor Party together with Mapam) won 52 seats, while the Likud won 39 seats. On March 10, 1974, Golda Meir wrote to President Zalman Shazar that she had formed a government. The coalition agreement was signed that day between the Alignment (Ma'arakh), the National Religious Party and the Independent Liberal Party.²² The election results lit a red light at the top of the party. On January 31, 1974, a meeting of the Labor Party Center was held at which the results of the elections to the Eighth Knesset and the coalition negotiations that followed them were summarized. The meeting was opened by Labor Party Secretary Aharon Yadlin, who stated that "we left this election campaign in peace. But if we want to protect the hegemony of the Labor Party in the country, we must draw conclusions". He stated that the party paid in these elections "for mistakes we must have made in all areas of society" and that the Yom Kippur War also influenced the voter's decision, but part of the blame lies with party members due to internal disputes. "We have also paid and are paying because of the unnecessary internal rivalry", Yadlin stated, adding: "It is possible to argue on ideological issues, even on socio-economic and political issues. But a reasonable and tolerable proportion is needed [...] and we have lost that proportion. We have stopped arguing with rivals and we are arguing only with ourselves [...] we need to stop the split within the party".²³

In this government, Yitzhak Rabin served for the first time as Minister of Labor. As for Golda Meir, Abba Eban, Moshe Dayan, Pinchas Sapir, Israel Galili and Yigal Allon, they all returned to serve in the new government in the same positions they held in the previous government. This fact created a feeling in the public that the Labor Party did not draw any real conclusions from the failure of the war and this was reflected in the continuation of the protests against the government. The report of the Agranat Committee, which examined the failures of the Yom Kippur War and the first part of which was published on April 1, found the military echelon responsible for the failures of the war and cleared of guilt the political echelon, which included Golda and Moshe Dayan. On April 10, following public pressure, Golda resigned. The Labor Party now faces the greatest and most fateful test in its history: to be able to propose a new prime minister who will be able to unite all parts of the party and to do so with the utmost care and speed.

On April 21, the Labor Party Center decided to select a candidate to form a new government and head it. The two candidates were Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres. It was the first confrontation between the two politicians. The confrontation between them was almost inevitable. Rabin later wrote about this point in time that "I was 'green' in the party [...] I was not involved in the life of the party and I did not know its activists closely [...] I only entered the Knesset in January [...] I saw the possibility that Peres

would serve as prime minister on behalf of the Labor Party very seriously. [...] I saw a first-rate moral flaw that the Labor Party would offer a candidate who did not wear the IDF uniform, for the senior political position in Israel".²⁴ Aaron Yadlin, the chairman, opened the party's center meeting on April 22, 1974 and stated that "we are approaching one of the most dramatic moments in the life of the party" and that is the election of a new candidate for the post of prime minister. He claimed that in every confrontation there is tension and "the passions get hot" and that "the two candidates [Peres and Rabin] undertook to treat each other with respect and to uphold the rules of fair struggle". He added that: "I express my confidence that this will be the case even after the decision".²⁵

After a number of speeches by party members, some of which addressed the conflict and divisions within the party, the vote took place. Out of 611 eligible voters, 558 eligible voters participated in the election. The number of valid votes was 552 after six voted in blank ballots. Yitzhak Rabin won 298 votes and Shimon Peres won 254 votes and therefore Yitzhak Rabin was elected. It is possible that Rabin won the vote because his political-factional background was less pronounced than that of Shimon Peres, who was identified with Rafi.²⁶ Shimon Peres was given the right to speak first. "I have no complaints about the results," he said, adding: "I am sure that Yitzhak Rabin and I will become even closer friends than we were before this election campaign". Peres later stated that he knew Rabin "almost from a youth" and that "if I am not mistaken, serious disagreements have once been discovered between us. And that is because he loves photography so much".²⁷ Peres described how the two toured Africa in 1963, shortly before Rabin was appointed chief of staff and that Rabin, who loved to take pictures, was equipped with two cameras and lingered in front of every waterfall that came his way, upsetting Peres that was not interested in it at all. In December 1963, Rabin was appointed chief of staff and Shimon Peres still served as deputy defense minister in the Eshkol government, after the retirement of Ben-Gurion. "We worked together, and we found a common language and so it will be in the future," Peres stated, adding, "I will help him as best I can".²⁸ After Peres, Rabin spoke. Although he opened his remarks with "Dear friends and my friend Shimon," he hardly referred to his opponent later on. Only once did he mention Peres, when he stated "We will both go together, you Shimon and I, as part of the group that goes together along the way".²⁹

The results of the vote on the election of the Labor Party candidate for the formation of a government were a landmark in the history of the party. Now it was the time for the new generation in party leadership. Now it seemed that in the Labor Party after the vote in the center of the party a spirit of reconciliation was blowing and feelings of recovery and hope replaced the embarrassment and frustration. Shimon Peres explained in an interview that the struggle for the top of the party was conducted in a new style, and the competition was conducted with almost complete fairness and without a hint

of contempt for the opponent. He claimed, "The divisional and factional matter which is the most difficult thing in the party, is nearing its end".³⁰

Towards the end of 1975 the first significant cracks began to form in the delicate fabric of relations between the two politicians, a tension that affected the entire party. Before there was a complete rift between them, the two often met for consultations on Saturdays at Rabin's house. The distance from people, reports and telegrams and the atmosphere of the day of rest, made these conversations pleasant and calm.³¹ It was the quiet before the storm. Towards the end of 1975, Rabin began, mainly in private conversations, to criticize what was happening in the defense establishment, while mainly criticizing Peres. The tension stemmed from different approaches related to the Ministry of Defense and the defense system. A public confrontation between the two was now a matter of time. The source of the tension stemmed from the fact that while the prime minister is a veteran and experienced military man, the defense minister is actually a citizen, and Rabin felt that he understands more about military and security matters than the defense minister. On November 1, 1975, the newspaper "Emda", a magazine published between 1974-1979 and used as a socialist platform for critique of Israeli policy, society and culture, edited by Menachem Brinker, wrote that tensions between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Defense Minister Shimon Peres were growing, and that "internal sources" in the Labor Party say that Rabin often in private conversations criticizes what is happening in the security system.³² Rabin, on the advice of Finance Minister Yehoshua Rabinowitz, sought to cut the defense budget and argued that spending should be limited. While the defense minister demanded to increase his budget by 300 million lirot and claimed to the press editors that as a result of the budget cuts, 4,000 workers will be fired from the military and aerospace industry.

Another moment of crisis in the relationship between the two occurred in early 1976. On January 26, Prime Minister Rabin went on a visit to the United States, mainly to advance the arms procurement program. A senior Israeli official, dubbed the "senior source" by the press and who in fact was the prime minister himself who spoke to reporters, criticized the fact that the procurement list submitted to the United States was excessive. The remarks received a great deal of media coverage in the Israeli press and embarrassed the top members of the Labor Party. Beyond that, it was estimated that the issue of inflating Israeli procurement lists could be detrimental to Israeli requests for procurement and military assistance in the future. Shimon Peres asked not to comment immediately, but on February 3, on the radio program broadcast by Galei Tzahal, the military radio station, he rejected the idea of resigning following the words of the "senior source" and said that "the basic plans for Israel's procurement applications are usually approved by the entire government, and, of course, the Prime Minister is a partner in submitting purchase requests from the United States".³³

In the run-up to the 1977 election campaign, the rivalry between Rabin and Peres intensified and tensions increased. Peres apparently had a hard time accepting the authority of Rabin, who was only one year older than him. The tension between Prime Minister Rabin and Defense Minister Peres has now become an open secret. Tensions reached a peak when at a Labor Party meeting in mid-May 1976, Peres sharply attacked Rabin for leaking to the press from government meetings. He based this accusation on an article by journalist Joel Marcus in the Haaretz newspaper, who had a conversation with an "internal source from Jerusalem who knows a thing". Peres argued that all the signs and facts indicate that the senior "internal source" is most likely nothing more than the prime minister himself. In particular, Peres was furious at the accusation implied by the senior source that the defense minister or his associates were partners in the campaign against the prime minister in the media, and that the defense minister was sitting on the fence. The meeting ended in a difficult exchange between the two. The party's secretary general, Meir Zarmi, and Finance Minister Yehoshua Rabinowitz tried to put out the fire and worked to prevent an internal crisis in the Labor Party. It was no easy task. In the party newspaper Davar, Daniel Bloch wrote on May 16 that "the Labor Party is the main loser from the unsettled relationship in the government". The journalist, who saw this internal rivalry as "self-destruction," noted that the rising tension between Peres and Rabin is already an "open secret" and that "it does not add to the image of the ruling party". He also claimed that there were increasing voices among the party's loyalists who believed that it was better for the party to freshen up itself on the opposition benches".³⁴ On May 18, 1976 the journalist M. Shmaryahu wrote in Maariv that Knesset members from the former Mapai unit expressed "discomfort and concern" over the situation created by the party leadership due to the confrontation between the defense minister and the prime minister. The journalist claimed that a possibility of seeking a change in the leadership of the state and the party was even considered, if the situation continued. He wrote: "It is widely believed that Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin went so far as to challenge relations with Defense Minister Mr. Shimon Peres, although some of the responsibility for the situation is attributed to the Minister of Defense".³⁵ Journalist Mirit Shem-Or published a story-article in which she mockingly reported on "Yitzhakela and Shima'ala" two kindergarten children who were "the most considerate and intelligent children in the whole kindergarten" and now they are fighting among them.³⁶

The next day, May 19, a day after the reconciliation meeting between Rabin and Peres, the press dealt extensively with this matter. A Maariv reporter reported that Rabin and Peres met at the Prime Minister's Office in Tel Aviv and that their conversation lasted more than an hour. they discussed the cases and statements that created the tension in the relationship and "examined ways to purify the atmosphere". The two agreed, it was reported, that in the future they would avoid publicly criticizing each other and settle

their personal relationships in four-way conversations.³⁷ Journalist Levi Yitzhak Ha'Yerushalmi wrote that "thunder and lightning" in the relationship between the two illustrate a phenomenon "more difficult than a lack of love between the two". He argued that the "war of words" between the two leaders of the Labor Party was a sign of "the loss of a common path, if there was one in the past", between the two personalities.³⁸ A Yedioth Ahronoth correspondent reported that "circles in the Labor Party" expressed satisfaction with the fact that the two met, but estimated that "the renewed understanding between Rabin and Peres will not last" and some claimed that "this is a reconciliation of only a few weeks".³⁹ Satirist Didi Manosi also stung the party and the entire political system in his rhyming column in Yedioth Ahronoth.⁴⁰ On May 21, journalist Yosef Harif summed up the reconciliation attempt between the two and stated that "they suspect each other, they dislike each other and each one believes he is talented from the other [...] there were many opportunities for reconciliation of truth between them. Something in the "chemical composition" of the two personalities that is unable to connect".⁴¹ In the cartoon painted by Ze'ev, the cartoonist of "Maariv", Rabin and Peres were seen shaking hands with their legs facing in opposite directions, which came to illustrate that the reconciliation is nothing but a pretense. In the "letters to the editor" in the various newspapers, the readers expressed their opinions on the matter. "This is the first time in the history of Israeli governments that ministers are attacking each other loudly [...] It does not add respect to either the ministers or the Labor Party [...] The Labor Party will face a difficult situation in the next Knesset elections and this will only strengthen the other parties", Reuven Salem from Ramla wrote in the Maariv newspaper.⁴² Another reader, Yaakov Zakai from Tel Aviv wrote: "What hurts the citizens of the country is to see that the struggle [between Peres and Rabin] is spreading out, to the media and the prime minister does not refrain from biting publicly [...] they can settle disputes modestly and not in the media".⁴³

Toward the Ninth Knesset Elections: An uncompromising struggle

Yitzhak Rabin identified Peres as a stubborn opponent. He knew that Peres was ambitious and optimistic, two qualities that did characterize him all his life. He saw how Peres was making his way in politics fearlessly and knew that before him was a bitter struggle. He therefore proposed to Peres in August 1976, under secrecy and 'with the mediation of Dov Tzmir, the head of the Labor Party's information staff that was acceptable to both of them, a long-term agreement. According to the agreement, Peres will agree not to run for the party leadership and in return he will be a senior partner in all party decisions, in determining the party's strategy and will also deal with various areas that are not within his ministerial responsibility. The two talked but did not reach any agreement.⁴⁴ The gaps between them were deep and the personal animosity obscured any possibility of compromise. In October 1976,

Rabin and Peres' relationship ran aground again after an interview given by Yitzhak Rabin to the Haaretz newspaper. On the same day, a clarification call was held between the two in an attempt to alleviate the tensions, which generally escalated again in the fall of 1976, but the party circles were of the opinion that the tensions had not yet expired. "The confrontation between Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres is almost inevitable," journalist Daniel Bloch wrote in "Davar" on October 15, 1976, adding that the confrontation stemmed primarily from "a leadership crisis in the Labor Party after the Yom Kippur War".⁴⁵ In Yedioth Ahronoth, journalist Yeshayahu Ben Porat wrote that "the prime minister suspects the defense minister that from the first day Peres did not accepted the fact of Rabin's senior position and since then he has been consistently undermining him in an attempt to oust him as prime minister".⁴⁶ He described how Rabin and Peres sat side by side at a rally on the occasion of David Ben-Gurion's 90th birthday and stated: "It is a pity that there is no one there with moral authority, who will tell them both that they must make all the mental and intellectual effort necessary to transcend small and foolish accounts".⁴⁷ "We need a new, fresh, visionary party that is ready to make courageous decisions. A party that will open its gates to the younger generation, without a divisional barrier", lamented Uri Gordon, one of the founders of the Young Shift in the Labor Party.⁴⁸ The Young Shift Secretariat in Jerusalem has stated its support for the complete abolition of the party's divisions.⁴⁹ In the Prime Minister's Office, letters were received from concerned citizens, most of whom are undecided party members. "The prestige of the party and the government has never been so poor and humiliating as it is these days," wrote A. Mesh, a member of the party from Haifa. "unite the party from within, stop the personal conflicts", he wrote from the bottom of his heart.⁵⁰

Three F-15s made their way from the United States to Israel via Europe at noon on Friday, December 10, and when they landed in Israel they were received at the Air Force Base in an impressive ceremony attended by the Prime Minister, Chief of Staff Mota Gur and about 3,000 guests. Even before the ceremony, the Minister of Religions, Dr. Yitzhak Rafael, warned that the ceremony taking place on Shabbat evening might lengthen and desecrate the Shabbat and demanded that the Prime Minister cancel it. The ceremony, which took place as planned, was indeed extended due to the aerial demonstration held by the American pilots, but ended before the beginning of Shabbat. However, there was concern that government ministers and army chiefs had desecrated the Sabbath. The ultra-Orthodox parties submitted a motion of no confidence in the government on December 14, but it failed because it won only 48 supporters. Rabin took this seriously and decided on the dismissal of the three ministers of the National Religious Party (Mafdal), Interior Minister Yosef Burg, Minister of Religions Yitzhak Raphael and Minister of Welfare Zevulun Hamer. During this, Rabin created a situation in which the government did not have a majority and on December 21

announced the resignation of the government. The Knesset decided to dissolve and hold general elections on May 17, 1977.

The Labor Party's internal contention for the prime ministerial candidacy was now a political fact. Some feared that the expected struggle for party leadership might split and cloud its unity. The entire Ahdut HaAvoda division sided with Rabin, although it preferred Yigal Alon. The Rafi division sided alongside Peres, although some preferred Moshe Dayan. On February 5, 1977, the two prime ministerial candidates, Rabin and Peres, announced that they had agreed to run for office at the forthcoming Labor Party conference and that a secret ballot would be held on February 23, the second day of the conference. In both camps, activists prepared for a decision. Rabin and Peres were confident of their victory and the party's victory in the election, attended many rallies and met with activists.

Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres were very different in character. Rabin was introverted and shy, Peres was extroverted and sociable. Rabin refrained from making telephone conversations with the delegates at the conference, Peres, on the other hand, did many talks and thus managed to sweep away many activists in his favor. With the death of Pinchas Sapir in August 1975, Rabin lost the support of one of the most central and influential figures in the party, but still relied on Golda's support and also won the support of the kibbutz movement. Many party members, however, were still debating between the two. Peres won the support of an enthusiastic camp of young people whose innovative style spoke to them, Rabin won the unconditional support of Labor Party veterans.

On the night of February 23, the results of the vote were announced: Yitzhak Rabin was elected as the party's candidate for prime minister. Rabin received 1,445 votes compared to 1,404 votes for Peres. The close result made it clear to Rabin how much power Peres had in the party. Peres did not fear challenging the leader, but on the other hand he was also careful not to personally attack Rabin for fear that an open and uncompromising struggle would undermine the party's status and power base. Maariv's editorial states that "the close struggle between the two candidates, which was saturated with enormous tension and sometimes accompanied by severe personal expressions, reached highs yesterday".⁵¹ In Davar, Knesset member Israel Kragman called for the dismantling of the two Rabin and Peres headquarters and "liberating the party from the Divisions".⁵² A letter in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the newspaper "Davar" expressed the public mood, both regarding the division and regarding the stubborn rivalry. "Stop personal revenge and do not see in the power of authority the ultimate goal [...] act in honest and genuine friendship for the benefit of the party and the people", wrote the reader Naftali Zellinger from Netanya.⁵³

About three weeks after Rabin's victory over Peres at the party conference, Haaretz newspaper journalist Dan Margalit published an article about a dollar account in Leah Rabin's name at the US National Bank in

Washington. This publication led to what was called the "dollar crisis" following which Rabin resigned as prime minister on April 7, paving the way for his rival Peres to reach the top. On April 10, Shimon Peres was elected the Labor Party's candidate for prime minister and head of the Knesset list. After the election, Peres spoke about the parties' expected campaigns in the elections and even expressed regret over Rabin's resignation in the circumstances in which he retired. No one shed a tear from excitement. When asked a few days later if he believes Rabin should continue in office, Peres replied, "one should, of course, act in accordance with the provisions of the law. Personally I must say that I was very careful not to add a personal tone to the constitutional situation created".⁵⁴

Many fates of movements and personalities were at stake, with the question hovering above all: Will the Labor Party maintain its central place in the country and will Shimon Peres succeed in preserving the hegemony of the labor movement and forming a government after the election? On May 17, 1977, Israel went to the polls and the first political upheaval in its history. The Labor Party was pushed to the opposition benches after these elections.

Conclusions

As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, there are several reasons for the defeat of the Labor Party in the 1977 elections: class and economic disparities in Israel, corruption in the ruling party, disconnection of leadership from the will of voters and of course the Yom Kippur War, a war that shocked Israel. But the internal conflicts within the party also affected the public, who in this election chose to punish the Labor Party and end its long-standing hegemony. The conflict that bothered the public the most was the struggle for the top spot between Rabin and Peres.

To what extent was the leadership itself responsible for the defeat in the 1977 election? Was the intra-party rivalry and opposition to those at the top of the party a catalyst for the political upheaval? The internal conflicts have eroded the body of the party as well as the authority of its leader. The figure of Yitzhak Rabin as the leader who inherits Ben-Gurion, Eshkol and Golda seemed pale and the repeated confrontations damaged the image of the entire party and also reminded the public of the fierce disputes of party veterans in the previous decade. The public was fed up with it.

In an article published by Avraham Wolfensohn in the newspaper "Davar" in May 1978, a year after the elections to the Ninth Knesset, he mentioned several reasons that he thought led to the collapse of the hegemony of the Labor Party in these elections. Among other things, he noted the Yom Kippur War, the "failure of ideological education" and the loss of the ideological path and manifestations of corruption. A special, albeit short, section, he devoted to what he called "the loss of solidarity at the top" and noted that "since the loss of solidarity at the top, the labor movement has decreed a steady decline from election to election".⁵⁵ Wolfensohn, of course,

meant the interpersonal conflicts that tore the party apart from the inside, chief among them the conflict between Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, which established the split in the party and damaged its public image to the point of disgust. About a year later, Yitzhak Rabin wrote in his autobiographical book that on May 17, 1977, the party reaped the "fruit of subversion, conflict and division"⁵⁶. Shimon Peres also hinted at this in his analysis of the reasons for the collapse of the hegemony. He saw the party itself guilty of its overthrow and especially blamed its divisions. "We spoke in different voices and in many tones", he explained.⁵⁷ To his friend the writer A.B. Yehoshua he noted, in a personal letter, the "power games" that still going on in the party even after the election, as one of the reasons for the election loss.⁵⁸

To what extent was the leadership itself responsible for the collapse? The internal conflicts harmed the party as well as the authority of its leader. Yitzhak Rabin's image as a leader seemed pale compared to the older generation of party leaders and the repeated confrontations that the media reflected and in fact created public opinion, harmed the image of the party as a whole and also reminded the public of the fierce disputes of party veterans in the previous decade. The public was tired of it. The press regularly reflected the struggle at the top and the bitter disputes between Rabin and Peres often grabbed the headlines in the newspapers, the commentary pages and also the satire. This attitude, which was often accompanied by sarcasm towards the two, influenced public opinion, the electorate, and was eventually reflected in the May 1977 ballot papers cumulatively with the additional reasons that led in these elections to the collapse of the Labor Party hegemony.

The struggle between the two politicians Rabin and Peres would disrupt the life of the party even in the years after the defeat in 1977, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, when it seemed that the two were reconciled, ripe for joint work and that the animosity between them had passed.

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