

Washington Jewish Week

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5/16/2012 10:31:00 AM

Shimon Peres: innovative and inspirational

by Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi

Special to WJW

At a time when most leaders around the world are disappointing their citizens, there is one leader who sets a shining example: Israeli President Shimon Peres.

This week Peres had a health scare. He is at home now recovering from surgery and all signs are that he will be fine. At age 88 he is strong and vital. Not so long ago, when there was a power blackout in Israel, he had to get to the 12th floor of a building in Tel Aviv. Much to the chagrin of his much younger body guards, he took the stairs. I expect he will be making a difference for years to come.

At the Jewish Funders Network conference recently, Peres explained, "Leadership in our time is not to be on top, but to be ahead. If you want to be a leader you need the confidence of the people that you will serve them, not rule them." He spoke of his recent visit to California where he met with Google leader Serge Brinn (a Russian Jew who was brought as a child to America by the Jewish Agency) and Facebook innovator Mark Zuckerberg. He pointed out that without an army or a fortune; they had created a revolution greater than Lenin. "The world changed overnight. Can you conquer wisdom with armies?" Peres asks. "Now that I'm president, I don't order. I ask. It's a government of will."

To Peres there are three main issues on the agenda of the Jewish people. The first is to live a moral life - to consider the other man as you would yourself. He reminds people that the Ten Commandments only have 172 words, yet it is 3,500 years old and the basis of a civilization.

The second is to love knowledge and keep our curiosity. He points out that the secret to Jews' success is our constant dissatisfaction. We look for the right questions for the future. Then the answers follow. Our basis, he points out, is tikkun olam, wanting to "produce a better man and a better world." Peres' recent focus is the intersection between brain science and computers. His speeches at AIPAC, JFN, in Canada and more have advanced this very forward thinking topic. His legacy may well be the very exciting new nonprofit he inspired: israelbrain.org.

Peres' third agenda issue is to seek peace and to help stop those who bring terror and war. Known foremost for his peace work and Nobel Prize, Peres is a champion of peace. He cares as much about Palestinians and other Arab children as he does about Jewish children. It shows. When a mosque in Israel was burned by extremists, he not only spoke out, he went

there, took off his shoes, demonstrated his respect for the Imam and our Muslim neighbors. He has done regular interviews in Arabic language media - asking for peace and a two state solution that can help BOTH sides. He walks the walk.

These same principles have guided entire Peres' life. As a child in Poland, Peres (then Persky) spent a lot of time with his grandfather, who was an Orthodox rabbi. His father had gone to Israel and later brought Shimon and his mother and brother there. His grandfather stayed behind with his congregation. At one point all the Jews left in his town in Poland were forced into the shul. The doors were locked. All the people inside, including Peres' grandfather, were burned alive. Still, despite this horror that happened to his family, Peres is an optimist.

In his early twenties, Peres was a young farmer and kibbutz leader. He married his true love, Sonya, and they had three kids. Sadly, both Sonya and his beloved brother died recently.

Peres was recruited into politics and became a big fan of Israel's first leader, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion. He still literally has a doll of Ben-Gurion on his desk, and recently published a book on Ben-Gurion.

A master linguist (and his daughter follows in his footsteps as a full-time linguist) Peres' French is flawless. His relations with France enabled Israel's nuclear program. This likely prevented several wars, saving lives on all sides.

Peres has been friends with every U.S. president going back for decades. He is especially close to President Bill Clinton, and is a real fan of President Obama, whom he will see soon when Peres accepts a Presidential Medal in June at the White House.

Peres always talks of Israel as a country of innovations. But he himself is a constant innovator - constantly reinventing himself. He was with five different political parties, served in almost every leadership role in Israel since its founding, is both a hawk and a dove at the same time, and shows peace through strength. Evolving from being a supporter of expanding Jewish neighborhoods in the West Bank to a willingness to give up land for peace, he says that the Middle East's greatest challenge today is poverty, not politics.

Always an optimist, Peres reminds us "your head is better than a computer. You can imagine."

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