Remembering President Yitzhak Navon: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot

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By
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With the passing of Yitzhak Navon on November 7, 2015, we've come to an end of an era. Born in Jerusalem on April 9, 1921, he was a proud and vocal scion of Sephardic culture and tradition. His family had lived in Jerusalem since the 17th century, descendants of the Jews exiled from Spain in 1492. He was part of the old Sephardic yishuv that had been dwelling in the land of Israel for centuries. Few of these Sephardic veterans are still alive, and none has had a larger impact than Yitzhak Navon.

Yitzhak Navon grew up in an environment in which Jews and Arabs lived side by side, and interacted with great friendship and courtesy. Throughout his life, even during war time, he cherished memories of Jewish-Arab co-existence in Israel as mutual partners in building the State of Israel. If positive relations existed in the past, he was confident that they could be re-established in the present and for the future.

Yitzhak Navon was fluent in Hebrew, Arabic, English and Judeo-Spanish. He saw himself as a bridge-builder, someone who could bring people of diverse backgrounds together. Reminiscing about his political career going back to his years as top adviser to David Ben Gurion, he said: "There were in Israel at the time Jews who came from 102 countries and spoke 81 languages – how do you consolidate them into one nation? This is where I saw my role."

Yitzhak Navon became President of Israel in 1978. He was the most "visible" Sephardic Jew in the world during his tenure, and he relished the opportunity to share his memories and insights with the general public. He was a poet and playwright, an engaging speaker, a noble individual who always maintained a kind, gentle appearance.

Although Yitzhak Navon was clearly identified as a man of peace and mutual respect, he also recognized the real threats to Jewish survival in the land of Israel. As a young man, he served in the Hagana. He longed for peace but knew that Israel had to be prepared to defend itself from its enemies.

In this week's Torah portion, we read a famous passage that had been uttered by our forefather Yitzhak. When he was trying to determine the identity of the son who stood before him, Yitzhak said: "The voice is the voice of Yaacov, but the arms are the arms of Esav." While this verse is often understood as a sign of confusion on the part of Yitzhak, it also can be understood in another way.

Yitzhak had a dilemma. He knew that one of his sons would be his successor in building a new nation. Yitzhak favored Esav who was strong, ruddy and warlike. But he must also have realized that a nation cannot be founded upon brute force alone. It needed spiritual and intellectual foundations. Yaacov represented the thoughtful, studious and peace-loving personality. While Yitzhak saw Yaacov's virtues, he did not think Yaacov had the physical strength and military sense to actually be a leader of a nation.

When Yaacov appeared before Yitzhak, he was dressed as though he were Esav. I believe Yitzhak saw through the ruse…but was very impressed. Now he understood: Yaacov was not simply a passive, quiet idealist; he was ingenious and gutsy; he was able to outsmart Esav. Yitzhak then said: The voice is the voice of Yaacov; it is a sweet, gentle and kind voice. But the hands are the hands of Esav; Yaacov had mustered the inner strength to take risks, to combat his brother.

The combination of a peace-loving voice and strong arms willing to wage battle was the right combination for a leader of a nation. So Yitzhak blessed Yaacov, and did not rescind that blessing even after Esav turned up to demand his blessing. Yitzhak now placed his confidence in Yaacov.

I think the words of our forefather Yitzhak can be aptly applied to our modern day Yitzhak Navon. His voice was the voice of peace, tolerance, mutual respect. He exuded kindness, warmth, a perpetual smile. But his hands were the hands of Esav. When necessary, Yitzhak Navon stood strong and courageously to defend his nation. He was a warrior who never lost his vision of peace.

With the passing of Yitzhak Navon, we have reached the end of a certain era in the history of Israel and the Jewish People. The generation of those born and raised in the old Sephardic Yishuv in Jerusalem is coming to a close. Yet, the voice of Yitzhak Navon and his generation is a voice that needs to be heard in our day and in the future.

The memory of Yitzhak Navon is a blessing and inspiration to Israel, to the Jewish People, and to all good people everywhere.

Angel for Shabbat