

# Mourning Shamir: The Moral Dilemma

The death of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir confronts Israel's supporters with a moral dilemma, whether to continue down Shamir's path of violence begun in the dark days after World War II, or reject a future as the permanent occupiers of the Palestinian people, writes Marc H. Ellis.

By Marc H. Ellis

How shall Jews mourn the death of Yitzhak Shamir? Born of a generation scarred by the Holocaust, a pioneer of the state of Israel, as well as the state's longest serving prime minister, Shamir expanded the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and cruelly suppressed the Palestinian intifada of the late 1980s. How should such a person be remembered in the broader arc of Jewish history?

Our decision on how to mourn Shamir depends on which side of the Jewish empire divide we find ourselves on. In terms of Jewish empire, Shamir should be mourned. He should also be lauded. Rising from the ashes of the Holocaust, his operating motif was "by any means necessary." As a leader in Jewish terrorist cells that formed the basis for the state of Israel, Shamir then used state violence in his role as prime minister.

Shamir had few if any qualms about using violence to achieve Israel's goals at least as he saw them. Indeed, though sometimes differing in tactics or, better, explaining those tactics which were essentially similar in content, few of Israel's pioneers had qualms about what Jews did to Palestinians. That would come later, much later.

Many of the founders of the state have died. Others will follow soon. What are Jews to make of their efforts in building a Jewish state? Is it for us to judge them? Do we have enough historical distance to make these judgments? After the Holocaust, what can Jews say about Jewish empowerment? After what Israel has done to Palestinians, what is the price of our silence?

Jewish dissent regarding the state of Israel is longstanding. Today we have reached a crossroads. If our judgments about Israel's policies are negative, perhaps they should they remain within the framework of the necessity of a Jewish state. We can parse policy decisions as to whether they are good for Israel.

Or has the time come to question the very existence of Israel since as it turns out, the imperatives of a state are the same for Israel as for any other state? Israel's state "imperative" reality is one that Jews have long denied. With the

death of Shamir, a broader critique of Jewish leadership in the post-Holocaust/Israel era is necessary. Where it will take us is unknown.

Shamir's policies, as well as the policies of other of Israel's prime ministers – and indeed those of Jewish leadership in America who have functioned as enablers of these policies – raise the issue of Jewish history and destiny to a new, unprecedented level. We have reached the point of no return. The choice is before us.

Are we to be permanent conquerors of another people? Or we are to begin again, searching for an interdependent empowerment with Palestinians and with other communities around the globe?

If an interdependent empowerment is our goal, we need to seriously ask ourselves whether that goal can be reached with a Jewish state or if such a state permanently impedes that possibility. Today Israel and Jews in general are further away from an interdependent empowerment than at any time in the post-Holocaust era. Moreover, without a deep and material Jewish solidarity with a Palestinian future there is little chance for a collective or even individual ethical life as Jews.

Yitzhak Shamir should be remembered for impeding a Jewish ethical future. The first Palestinian intifada, which Shamir ordered crushed, may have represented the last chance for reaching across the Israel/Palestinian divide. Or was it the very formation of the state of Israel which Shamir helped birth?

The abyss of Jewish ethical life has arrived. It is us. Mourning Shamir must face this abyss squarely. As well, we must connect Israel's dots. Does Israel have the desire or the ability to cross back over the Jewish empire divide?

Mourning Shamir. Mourning what Jewish life has become. Hope for a future beyond being oppressed and oppressing others. The time is now. Is it too late?

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