

## *Transforming Situations*

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*Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Service  
John F. Kennedy School of Government,  
November 15, 1995*

THIS MEETING – now a commemoration and memorial tribute – was originally to have been a welcome. We had hoped and expected to greet and warmly receive one of the world's significant leaders, as well as one of the most important figures in the history of the State of Israel.

Now, all of our early and eager preparations have been changed, changed by a terrible event that will leave its deep mark on the memory and spirit of us all. Tasks that were already difficult and dangerous are now likely to be even more so.

As we look across nations and peoples, there are never enough individuals and leaders who are courageous and yet also human in their sensitivities, strong and even unyielding when necessary, but also willing to grasp essential opportunities, and to transform situations in response to changing circumstances and to a new vision of what may be possible. Yitzhak Rabin was such a person. The loss of any such person, at any time, is a grave blow for everyone, everywhere. The loss of *this* extraordinary person, at this hazard-

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ous and uncertain time, has struck suddenly, with a gravity that all of us will feel for a very long time to come.

Although we are familiar with Prime Minister Rabin's remarkable achievements, it is nonetheless important to recall some of his accomplishments. When he was very young, he risked his life to help establish the State of Israel. Later, as a general, he was one of the architects of the Six-Day War. As an ambassador, he sustained and deepened the commitment of the United States to Israel. As a defense minister, he helped to forge the agreement with Egypt that paved the way for the Camp David accord. Then, most recently as Prime Minister, he found, slowly and painfully, his own pathway, and that of his nation, toward a difficult and demanding peace, and he found himself often alone in the midst of honest doubt and defiant opposition.

He was a soldier dedicated to victory but ambivalent about war, a statesman devoted to peace but anxious about its fragility, as well as about his nation's security. We admire him the more, precisely because he was not always absolutely single-minded, or utterly self-confident, or fully persuaded that he knew firmly what was right, or what was the true will of his people, or of God.

Now he has been swept away by those who have, unfortunately, no such hesitations. The contrast is blinding in its clarity and power to all except those, now so numerous, and in many lands, who have far less difficulty than did Yitzhak Rabin in distinguishing at all between their own vision of truth and God's vision.

There are also no simple, clear lessons that we can learn from this terrible event. But I do strongly believe that this is a time for everyone to reassert – with renewed force – a commitment to democratic forms of government, which require not only freedom of expression and the vigorous exchange of different views in order to prosper, but also a significant level of tolerance and mutual understanding and an uncompromising commitment to the rule of law: not one's own view of the law but the established law of any civil and legitimate democratic state. Those individu-

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als who wish to bear witness to what they believe to be a higher law, or a more sacred truth, should choose paths that very great religious and moral leaders have long since taught us to choose: nonviolence and forbearance, let us say, require more courage, more patience and steadfastness, more religious spirit, and certainly more humility in relation to God, than acts such as those we see now carried out almost daily in the names of the different gods of different peoples. Surely it is time to remind ourselves that we are citizens who live among other citizens; that our civic duties involve civility; that we belong to democracies which deserve to be cherished, not desecrated.

Next, and here I speak for myself since there may be others in our university who have a different view, I believe that we must now pursue the process of peace in the Middle East (and elsewhere) with even greater intensity. It may be more difficult to do so. But we cannot let those who are committed to disruption and violence prevail. Of course the peace process must take every responsible caution, on every side, to insure the security of Israel and of all people. But moments and leaps of faith will at points be required. Moments of faith on behalf of peace, properly prepared, simply must be preferred to actions in the service of wars that have no end and that now offer only the mere illusion of victory.

As we go forward, let us remember the deeds and life of Yitzhak Rabin. Let us celebrate the very conflicts of his sometimes divided mind and heart, as well as his decisiveness and strength. And even when events may be discouraging, when the odds in favor of peace may be at their very lowest point, let us have hope and the will to realize our hopes. "Either we have hope within us," wrote Václav Havel not long ago, "or we do not." Hope, he said:

*is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some particular... estimate of the situation.... It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart.... It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.<sup>1</sup>*

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Yitzhak Rabin concluded that peace makes sense. That conclusion had become the orientation of his spirit and heart. We are grateful to him for that, and we must now dedicate ourselves to ensuring that his hope does indeed become reality.

<sup>1</sup> Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizďala*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 181.