

Bildner event reviews the legacy of Yitzhak Rabin

Jacob Kamaras
THE JEWISH STATE
November 27, 2009

Rather than focusing on how a chasm in Israeli politics resulted in former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, the work of Dr. Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi shows a divided Israeli society through the ways Rabin was memorialized.

Vinitzky-Seroussi, who works in the Sociology and Anthropology departments at Hebrew University of Jerusalem but is researching collective memory at Yale University this year, spoke at Rutgers University's Douglass Campus Center Nov. 18 on the radically different ways in which the cities of Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv commemorated Rabin after he was shot in Tel-Aviv by Yigal Amir, a Jewish-Israeli opponent of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, on Nov. 4, 1995.

The program was the Ruth and Alvin Rockoff Annual Lecture of The Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life. Vinitzky-Seroussi recently came out with a book titled "Yitzhak Rabin's Assassination and the Dilemmas of Commemoration."

With Jerusalem containing a politically right-wing and religious population compared with Tel-Aviv's left-wing and cosmopolitan orientation, the cities already represented a bifurcation of Israeli society -- but Tel-Aviv's commitment to remembering Rabin, and Jerusalem's scant effort to that end because of Rabin's left-wing politics, accentuated those social differences and gave Tel-Aviv a newfound legitimacy as an alternative capital of Israel, Vinitzky-Seroussi argued.

"The two cities can be said to define two distinct Israeli national identities," Vinitzky-Seroussi said to an audience of about 75 people. Well before Rabin's death, Tel-Aviv was seen as a "city of sins along the Mediterranean shore," an escape route from the sacred and spiritual center of Jerusalem, Vinitzky-Seroussi said.

"Israelis have long joked that the best thing in Jerusalem is the highway to Tel-Aviv," she said.

The way a nation chooses to remember its past is an important method of studying culture, she said, because memorials are shaped by both the perception of the past and a nation's present needs, and reinforce the role of national representations within the hearts of a nation's citizens and the minds of outsiders.

"They evoke sentiments, assert views and attitudes," Vinitzky-Seroussi said of memorials.

In all likelihood due to Rabin's willingness to compromise with Palestinians in the peace process, it took Jerusalem two years after Rabin's death to initiate a commemoration for him, Vinitzky-Seroussi said. Ehud Olmert, then Jerusalem's mayor, initially said an expensive sculpture

donated by American artist Roy Lichtenstein served to commemorate Rabin, but that sculpture was "forced on the municipality," she said.

Rabin, born in Jerusalem in 1922, was buried on Mount Herzl like other Israeli dignitaries, but Jerusalem didn't house his remains, and a plaque for Rabin outside city hall says nothing about the circumstances of Rabin's death or his most important political views and accomplishments, Vinitzky-Seroussi said.

Perhaps Olmert, of the Likud party at the time, shunned memorializing Rabin because he was a leader of the rival Labor party, but Jerusalem never similarly ignored the deaths of Labor leaders in the past, Vinitzky-Seroussi said. Olmert also ignored the proposed naming of Zion Square, a frequent site of violent demonstrations about the peace process, to Rabin Square.

"When compared to its rival Tel-Aviv, the silence of the capital city and its ensuing discussion are thunderous," Vinitzky-Seroussi said.

In Tel-Aviv, where Rabin lived most of his life and was shot on a Saturday night after giving a speech, Vinitzky-Seroussi explained that Mayor Roni Milo convened the city council within days of Rabin's assassination and decided to change the name of Kings Israel Square to Rabin Square, with a ceremony at the end of the shiva mourning period for Rabin.

In an apolitical memorial ceremony with no banners, only Milo and Rabin's widow Leah spoke, and the crowd was asked not to applaud at any point in order to avoid supporting or resenting any sentiments that were expressed. About 300,000 people attended, Vinitzky-Seroussi said, and at another memorial ceremony one year later the city unveiled a monument at the site of the assassination that said of Rabin: "Peace is his testament." On a concrete wall near the monument, Tel-Aviv also left the graffiti sprayed during the immediate aftermath of Rabin's death intact, she said.

"Nobody can mistake it for anything other than what it is," Vinitzky-Seroussi said of Tel-Aviv's Rabin monument. "To all who passed by, it is clear who Rabin was, how he died, and what his politics were." While Tel-Aviv continued to pay respect to Rabin, Olmert grew increasingly hostile about the issue, saying in February 1998 that: "I'm not in a contest to name every building and every street corner after Rabin," Vinitzky-Seroussi said. Jerusalem named a boulevard after Rabin on Jerusalem Day in May 1998, but the boulevard is in a relatively empty area where nobody lives and people drive by quickly without ever seeing what is written on the Rabin plaque.

The ceremony for Rabin Boulevard was squeezed in at 7:45 p.m. between other several other programs on Jerusalem Day, Vinitzky-Seroussi said, and just 80 people attended since many choose to avoid Jerusalem's traffic on that Israeli holiday.

"The capital forgot Rabin and the assassination, and when it was forced to remember, it did so ambivalently, in an unthoughtful way and with a minor ceremony," Vinitzky-Seroussi said.

Since Tel-Aviv showed Rabin much more proper respect than Jerusalem, the city expanded its metaphorical reach beyond its geographical boundaries, and was able to challenge Jerusalem as the city that represents Israel's national identity, Vinitzky-Seroussi argued. Citing a midrash in which King David chose Jerusalem as Israel's because it was not part of any tribal territory, Vinitzky-Seroussi ended by criticizing Jerusalem's inability to ignore politics when the opportunity of remembering Rabin presented itself.

"I'm not sure that today Melekh (King) David would choose Jerusalem as a capital," Vinitzky-Seroussi said.

Dr. Yael Zerubavel, founding director of the Bildner Center, said before the lecture that she had been eager for years to bring Vinitzky-Seroussi to Rutgers, and that the school was fortunate that Vinitzky-Seroussi was available this year due to her visiting professorship at Yale.

Showing the crowd a copy of Vinitzky-Seroussi's new book on Rabin, released in October, Zerubavel said, "It's hot, literally hot from the press."

<http://thejewishstate.net/nov2709rabin.html>