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## The Rabin Myth and the Press

### Reconstruction of the Israeli Collective Identity

■ Yoram Peri

#### ABSTRACT

■ During the week following the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in November 1996, the Israeli media were confronted with a liminal situation created by the unprecedented political violence. Among the problems that emerged were potential social disintegration and anomie. One of the major factors in re-establishing social integration was the reconstruction of Rabin's biography by the media as the collective biography, so that it represented the collective identity of Israeli society. A content analysis of the Rabin myth created during this event shows the practices used by the hegemonic interpretative communities to reinvent society, and the ramifications of excluding the voices of others from the process of national deliberation on the media. ■

Key Words collective identity, interpretive communities, Israel, political rituals, Yitzhak Rabin

The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on the night of Saturday 4 November 1995, was one of the most dramatic events that had ever occurred in Israeli history. During the Israeli Oscar award ceremony a few days earlier, Rabin had said, 'For us in Israel, life is bigger than the movies.' He had no idea how portentous his words had been. Rabin's assassination occurred against a backdrop of a severe crisis of national identity. The media were a major factor in the process of shaping

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the new Israeli identity, and therefore held a crucial role in the aftermath of the assassination.

But what was this role? Were the media the public sphere, 'an instrument for enlightenment' (Scannell, 1992: 339) where free and unrestricted discourse took place? Or perhaps the national press and broadcasting were agencies contributing to the reproduction of existing political and economic orders by underpinning their legitimacy through their complex practices of representation (Hall, 1977, 1982; Hall et al., 1980)?

I argue the latter: that in spite of the fact that the media were seen as the central arena for deliberation about the national identity, such a discourse did not take place. Dominant groups in society have used that critical event in order not only to reintegrate society but to reinvent it (Anderson, 1983). They did so by broadening the hegemonic coalition and by distancing and discrediting others. Their tool was the media which deconstructed Rabin's biography and used the martyrdom to reconstitute the mainstream secular Zionist story.<sup>1</sup>

The unit of time under study is the week starting with the day of the killing. Had a shorter period of time been chosen — from the assassination to the end of the funeral, sundown on Tuesday 7 November — the most relevant analytical tool could be the concept of 'media event', such as a coronation, or the assassinations of Kennedy (Dayan and Katz, 1992) or Indira Gandhi (Minwalla, 1990 cited in Dayan and Katz, 1992). A week was chosen however, not just because of its association with the Jewish custom of *shiva* — the seven-day period of mourning — but primarily because this was the duration of the national period of mourning, the period of time in which — to use Schramm's analysis of the Kennedy assassination — the crisis ended and the social system returned to equilibrium (Schramm, 1965: 7).

The *shiva* was, first of all, the unit of time set by the media for the national ritual of mourning. This was the liminal period in which the event — the assassination and what it evokes — 'occupies society's center' (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 89). Indeed, the week culminated in a mass rally that paralleled the one that had served as the setting for the assassination, in the very same town square, with the name now changed from Kings of Israel Plaza to Rabin Plaza. It was at this rally that the widow of the assassinated prime minister also crowned the successor, Shimon Peres. But, above all, what marked the end of the week-long ritual of national mourning was the fact that this was when the media returned to their routine schedule of programmes.

### The political ritual that followed Rabin's assassination

The assassination of Rabin plunged Israelis into bewilderment, shock and deep anxiety. For many, the anger and bereavement were intense and felt personally; even for those outside the political centre, the mourning was not an expression of tertiary loss (of someone remote), but of primary loss (of a member of one's family or someone in a primary relationship). On the collective level, the assassination created a liminal moment, as defined by Victor Turner (1969, 1974), a situation of intense communal emotion, heightened social relations, *communitas*, a reflexive condition in which society looks at itself and asks not just what it is, but what it should be (1969).

Indeed, from the moment that word of the assassination became public, Israeli society opened the parentheses of a liminal moment: although there were no acts of sedition, incitement or outbursts of aggression, behaviour was characterized primarily by an interruption in the daily routine and high emotional intensity. The public drew together for a secular ritual of national mourning in which the media played a key role. In modern society, in which the media perform an important function in the bestowal of meaning and as a primary source of social cohesion (Jensen, 1991: 2), the ritual itself dons the garb of a media event. It becomes a secular ritual that television does not just cover, but shapes and creates; a political ritual fraught with secular symbolism that casts light on the core values of society and the components of the collective memory (Lukes, 1975: 12).

In fact, in the spirit of Rabin's remark about the movies and 'real life' in Israel, it is not difficult to create this symbolism. Instead of the invisible hand of a highly imaginative director, reality itself provided an ample supply of details: the site of the murder — a dim area at the foot of the stairs to the stage; the context — a mass rally intended to condemn political violence; the 'Song of Peace' at the end, its printed words stuffed deep inside the jacket pocket of the murder victim and stained with his blood during the assault; the fact that the Bible reading of the week was the Sacrifice of Yitzhak (Isaac); the day on which tradition holds that Rachel the biblical matriarch died; and, finally, the funeral in Jerusalem with Senator Ted Kennedy casting earth from the Arlington grave of his assassinated brother, John Kennedy, upon the fresh tomb.

The media, the two television channels in particular, were the main factors shaping and constructing the political ritual (Gusfield and Michalowicz, 1984), and they did so according to the acknowledged model of a media event. Entry into the liminal period was marked, first

and foremost, by upsetting the regular schedule of programmes and creating an intense level of media transmission. The new programming was characterized by live or 'direct' broadcasts and round-the-clock coverage. Even channels were unified — nine radio stations consolidated into one — and an attempt was made to consolidate the two television channels, which succeeded only for coverage of the funeral. Commercially were suspended on both radio and television.

Not only was the schedule of programmes disrupted, distinctions between various types of television genres became vague, narrative forms intermingling. Instead of the standard division into drama, news, documentary, fiction and entertainment, the ongoing broadcast on each channel was blended into one programme that combined these genres. 'The conferral of media event status', in the words of Dayan and Katz, 'consists in pulling it away from the news and translating it into a fictional register' (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 114). The text that was created thus blurred the distinction between news and fiction.

Even the traditional role of the newscasters was altered. From an ostensibly neutral and objective stance, reporting events 'from a distance', newscasters became identified with, involved in and expressive of the political centre (Levi, 1981). These were no longer sceptical, critical, ironical and occasionally cynical independent journalists, but rather partners to the cultural and political elite in playing the game, spelling out its views and serving as a kind of preacher or town-crier for the government. This was reflected in the style of Haim Yavin — Mr Israel Television — on Channel One. Yavin, who had once been reprimanded for daring to express a political view by raising his eyebrow to an interviewee, now spoke in the tones of a preacher suffused with deep faith. The delivery changed, assuming a dimension of holiness, of deep drama, while underscoring symbols and their ongoing interpretation.

Similar phenomena were evident in the newspapers during this period. The routine newspaper style was supplanted by a poetic, lofty rhetoric. Journalists lost their standing as observers, disinterested parties. They knowingly and openly assumed an active role in distributing and replicating values. This was reflected not just in the writing, but also in the decisions of the editors. Stickers were enclosed in the weekend editions of Israel's two tabloid newspapers, *Yediot Abaronot* and *Ma'ariv*, one saying 'No more violence', accompanied by a photograph of Rabin and the *Ma'ariv* masthead, and the other with the words 'Shalom Haver'. The *Yediot Abaronot* sticker had a distribution of almost 1 million copies.

Another disruption was in the direction of the flow of messages in both the electronic and printed media. Most messages flow from the media to the audience, but here the flow increased in the opposite direction, from the audience to the media. The number of listeners who called into the television stations increased several-fold, with a similar rise in calls and letters from readers to the newspapers. The media themselves allowed the general public — as opposed to those in positions of authority — to appear much more than usual.

Messages during this period also changed their character from the routine monologue to the more dialogic, to use Bakhtin's (1981) term. However, audience involvement was not just to express an opinion about the situation, but also to influence the programme content itself. For example, members of the Broadcasting Authority decided, upon directives from the Ministerial Committee for Ceremonies and Symbols, to continue its mourning programming for 48 hours from the end of the funeral. When regular programming was partially resumed on the third evening, however, the media were deluged by viewer response demanding that the special programmes be continued. Channel Two had a similar reaction from its viewers. Listeners also largely dictated the character of radio programmes. 'We operated according to the "publicometer" — telephone calls from listeners', said Moshe Shlonsky, director of the popular IDF radio station.<sup>2</sup>

But the entire week of mourning was more than just a media event, even though it occurred in the context of a crisis similar to the assassination of Kennedy or Indira Gandhi. Media events primarily revolve around one location where the event takes place, with most participants in the political ritual sitting at home and watching it with their families and friends, like the audience for a theatrical ritual. 'Media events have shifted the locus of ceremoniality from the piazza and the stadium to the living room' (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 211). Even if viewers dress up for the event and insist that they are taking part in a celebration (Minwalla, 1990), it is still basically passive participation.

What took place in the second week of November 1995 was quite different. First of all, it took place not only on the air but simultaneously in the presence of a large public. About a quarter of a million people participated in the mass rally in Kings of Israel Plaza on the night of the assassination, and some 35 percent of all television owners in Israel watched it from their homes. On the very night of the assassination, no fewer than 93 percent of the population had already heard about it — about 60 percent from the television and some 20 percent from the radio

(*Telesker* survey, December 1995). Approximately half (42%) immediately called their friends and relatives to tell them what happened (*Yediot Aharanot* survey, 9 November 1995). From that moment, pilgrimages began to the Rabin home in Jerusalem and later to their private home in Tel-Aviv, to the plaza where Rabin was shot, a day later to the expanse in front of the Knesset where his body lay in state, and finally to Mount Herzl where he was buried. From the time of the assassination until the end of the burial, approximately 80 percent of the 1.5 million households in Israel viewed at least part of the special broadcast on television.

During the course of the week, between a quarter and a third of all Israelis took part in outdoor events at the three pilgrimage sites.<sup>3</sup> Several hundred thousand congregated at the family site, the home of the victim and the political-civic site of the plaza. According to estimates, around 1 million people passed by the coffin lying in state at the Knesset, and about half a million took part in the funeral cortege or visited the graveside on Mount Herzl. Over 100,000 letters poured into the Office of the Prime Minister or his home, and these included texts, poems, pictures, drawings or gifts. Hundreds of condolence albums were also sent with expressions of sympathy from thousands of people. This does not fit easily into a description of a media event that moves from the piazza or stadium to the living room. It was more like an 'epidemic of *communitas*', the need for people to be together, to talk to each other and to feel close.

Moreover, behaviour in a media event is determined in advance; it is known and expected. The assassination of Rabin, however, evoked a wave of spontaneous and unplanned public behaviour. The most dramatic expression of this was the congregating of tens of thousands of youths in the Kings of Israel Plaza at all hours of the day and night throughout the week. The sitting in small circles in the light of the memorial candles, the melancholy songs they sang and the atmosphere suffused with religiosity surprised and greatly moved the Israeli public. This spontaneous behaviour in the plaza, and to a lesser extent at other pilgrimage sites, brought out the television cameras, although this was not planned. In fact, the boundaries were blurred here too, as reality on the streets and television reality intermingled. The congregating of people in the plaza or in the expanse in front of the Knesset drew the cameras, which caused even more people to congregate there. Reality influenced television behaviour, which in turn shaped reality, in a cycle. Thus the border dissipated between symbolic behaviour on the street and television ritual

at home, and the thin tissue that had separated 'true' and 'apparent' reality dissolved.

The literature that deals with political ritual notes several roles that the media perform in dramatic events such as the assassination of a head of state or a president (Greenberg and Parker, 1965). Together with the politicians, the media participate in shaping the pattern of national mourning, are a key to constructing the event and bestow upon it symbolic meaning, i.e. what might be termed an engineering of symbols. The media enable the participation of everybody in the ritual, create social networks and contribute to shaping the social structure. They facilitate the expression of grief and enable catharsis over the experience of loss (Schlesinger, 1987).

Political ritual has important functions in reasserting the political order that was damaged by the assassination. The murder of the supreme political authority generated a series of onerous political problems that impinge upon the very roots of government, the democratic political culture, and the normative system (Elderman and Simon, 1971; Marvick and Marvick, 1971). It is necessary to re-establish command quickly by selecting the heir and conferring legitimacy immediately upon his or her rule. There is a need by the audience to repledge allegiance, to reformulate its contract with the successor and to undertake to do battle with the forces that caused the assassination and shook up the political system. On the other hand, the heir uses the ritual to consolidate power by pledging to continue along the path of the predecessor and to restore life to its normal course. Legitimacy is premised upon social reintegration and it is the media that build the social networks and reshape the social order, just as they reinforce the core values set by the political centre (Verba, 1965).

But in the situation in which Israeli society found itself at the time of the assassination, the media performed not just these roles — which media have performed in similar circumstances, such as the Kennedy assassination — but an additional function: articulation of the collective identity (Barbero, 1993). As is shown below, the assassination took place in the context of identity crisis and could therefore have developed into a 'critical discourse event' (Herzog and Shamir, 1994), a significant social event in which a public debate ensues about issues fundamental to society, with various interpretive groups competing to bestow symbolic meaning on them.<sup>4</sup> The national media, press and electronic alike, gave the impression that such deliberation did take place, and ample articles were devoted to analysis of the causes and consequences of the murder. However, although the media could have been the major arena for such

negotiations, this process did not take place at all. On the contrary, the dominant elite groups seized control over the media, and sounded their voice whereas all other voices were ignored, silenced or excluded. The exclusion of these interpretations of the collective identity made the one presented by the elite unacceptable to the rest of society, thus deepening the social division and segmentation, rather than integrating the mourning.

#### The struggle for collective identity in a deeply divided society

The significant feature of Israeli society at the time of the assassination was that it was a society deeply divided. The debate over the peace agreements with the Palestinians and the Arab states was not just waged over the future of the territories that were occupied in 1967. A much deeper struggle has preoccupied Israeli society for over 20 years concerning the definition of its collective identity. Thus, the question of peace borders involves more than just geographical, strategic or political issues, but entails a redefinition of the social borders with the 'other' (LaPierre, 1984) — the relationship between the Jewish people and the nations of the region and the world, and the particularistic character of its national culture (Schlesinger, 1987: 285). Efforts to define the collective have evoked a bitter struggle in Israel, and this struggle is what fuelled and exacerbated the political debate over the peace process.

Trying to define the collective identity is an almost obsessive preoccupation in Israeli society, with no agreement among the various camps to accept the status quo, i.e. the coexistence of a plurality of definitions. On the contrary, each tried to shape the entire collective according to its definition of the civic religion. Even those who had once chosen a strategy of withdrawal and isolation (the anti-Zionist Orthodox groups) now sought to force their definition on the entire society.

It was in this context that Rabin was assassinated, as testified by the assassin himself. Yigal Amir could not bear to have Rabin, representative of one school of thought about collective identity, be in a position of such great influence, and because Amir had no way to curb this influence, he sought to exclude Rabin from the social negotiation. 'I wanted to get rid of him,' he said, 'it didn't have to be murder. I wanted to neutralize him. Had he been injured and left the game, that would have been good enough. He didn't necessarily have to die.'<sup>5</sup>

The Israeli and international media structured the assassination as a clash between the victim and his murderer, Rabin vs Yigal Amir, leader of the peace camp vs the representative of the fundamentalist, nationalist-

religious, peace-rejecting camp. However, the arena of struggle over the definition of the collective identity in Israel is much more complex and inhabited by at least four main streams of thought.

The central, hegemonic stream is the Zionist camp, which includes the traditional groups in the labour movement and also large segments of the nationalist camp. Despite differences among various factions in this stream, a broad common denominator enabled their consolidation under the rubric of Zionism, neo-Zionism, or post-state Zionism. This stream stands on an ideological platform of Zionism and democracy, grasped as a democratic, Jewish nation-state.

The second, the post-Zionist stream is small but important as it is composed of the intellectual and cultural elites that dominate the symbol-making of Israeli society. This group calls for basing the collective identity of Israel on the civic definition of all citizens of the state, without regard for their Jewish-Arab ethnic origin. It seeks to sever the link of Israeli citizens from the Jews in the diaspora, to eliminate the religious roots of Israeli identity and to base Israeli society first and foremost on universalistic values.

The third is the non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox stream, which views Israeli society as one grouping of Jews, just as there continue to be groupings of Jews in various countries in the world. For this stream, the basis for defining the collective identity is particularistic and exclusively religious.

The fourth stream has been called fundamentalist. These are the religious-Zionists, who advocate an ideology that integrates nationalism and religious faith, in the spirit of the teachings of Rabbi Kook and his disciples, Gush Emunim. This group seeks to base collective identity on particularistic Jewish values, but, in contrast with the third stream, the territorial component of the sacred homeland assumes much greater importance.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, this is not merely a debate about political orientation — foreign relations and security. Nor is it only a dispute over the nature of the constitutional arrangements, the basis for political authority and the legitimacy of the state institutions. Rather, this is a much deeper rift concerning the relevance of various components in the repertoire of the civic religion, the nature of the collective identity. It includes complex questions such as: what are the bounds of civic space? And even, what is the meaning of time — is it sacred or empty in the sense of Walter Benjamin? And, having returned to the homeland, are the Jewish people now living in a sacred era, with all that implies, or an era bereft of religious meaning?<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the assassin sought not just to halt the peace process, not just to prevent the withdrawal of Israeli governing institutions from Palestinian cities in the West Bank, but also to arrest the process of 'Hellenization' of Israeli society. As he awaited his victim at the edge of the mass rally, Amir chatted with the policemen there, castigating the singer Aviv Gefen, pop-culture hero of Israeli youth, who symbolized for him a foreign culture, and claimed that 'most of the participants in the rally are Arabs'. In other words, those who came to the rally and who claim for themselves the right to shape the identity of Israeli society in their own image are fundamentally illegitimate because they are the 'other'.

This analysis enables us to understand the connection between Yitzhak Rabin, 73 years old and the last of the Palmachniks (the elite units during the War of Independence), and the young Aviv Gefen, grasped simplistically by the other streams as the symbol of self-indulgence, foreign culture, nihilism and a lack of national roots. The bond forged between the two a moment before the rally began and which was expressed there reflects the closeness between the representative of the generation of 'candle children' and the representative of the generation of 1948, both members of the first stream in our categorization, the neo-Zionists.

As the peace process gained momentum and the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) expedited its evacuation from the territories, tension rose between the various streams, especially between the first and the third. Those in the nationalist religious-Zionist camp were under particular strain, as fears grew that the political process would also resolve the debate about collective identity. The peace process threatened to shatter their dream, destroy their spiritual world, and they found themselves in an untenable existential terror. Voices were raised during this period in their ideological journal *Nekuda*, which called for far-reaching measures, even severing ties with Israeli society and the state.

In the final analysis, on the night of Saturday 4 November, the three shots of Yigal Amir brought about a crisis, in Durkheim's terms, of anomie (1915).<sup>8</sup> The assassination of Rabin — the prime minister who represents political stability and the minister of defence who is the symbol of security more than anyone else in Israel — produced a palpable sense of insecurity, a fear of social disintegration and apprehension of what the future held: subversion of the public order, the crumbling of the normative system, civil war, even war with foreign powers. If the personification of security was murdered, anything could happen. 'A danger of clashes and loss of control threatens to split Israel from within',

wrote a level-headed political analyst the day after the assassination (Dan Margalit, *Ha'aretz*). It is little wonder that a poet used even more dramatic language: the assassination, she wrote, was 'something supernatural that toppled everything we believed in. Our entire world has been transfigured' (Dalia Rabikovitich, *Yediot Abaronot*, 6 November 1995).

The media, which during times of crisis usually serve to restore social integration, reshape the social structure and recreate the national consensus — the renewed social contract — performed a much more special function in Israel because of the deep cleavage in society. The media responded to the assassination in ways that had significance for the definition of the collective identity, taking advantage of the event to crystallize that identity. This was done by promoting the political ritual surrounding Rabin, building the myth of the man who became a symbol in his death. This the media accomplished by addressing a critical point in the collective identity — construction of the collective memory. 'Collective identity relates to a collective memory through which the contemporary group recognizes itself through a common past, remembrance, commemoration, interpretation and reinterpretation' (LaPierre, 1984: 196). In modern society, the media join the intellectuals in their traditional role of 'the selective interpretation of history' (LaPierre, 1984: 203–4).

Indeed, in the course of the week, the media were intensely preoccupied with the personality of Rabin, deconstructing his biography and constructing it anew, with the finished product elevated from a personal to a collective biography. In fact, the media used elements of Rabin's biography to shape a collective memory in order to construct a collective identity for Israeli society. The man Yitzhak Rabin metamorphoses into a symbolic representation of all Israeli society. 'He was us', wrote Yonatan Gefen (*Ma'ariv*, 6 November 1995). 'We wept for our father figure, and more so for ourselves. For Yitzhak Rabin, and more so for our own image', in the words of Ofer Shelach (*Ma'ariv*, 11 November 1995).

This is the significance of constructing the Rabin myth in the week following his assassination. It was not the cultural tradition of 'Speak of the righteous only after their death', but well beyond. This was a case of constructing a collective memory, 'a reshaping of practices through which people construct themselves as cultural authorities' (Zelizer, 1992: 4).<sup>9</sup> What then was the identity assumed by Rabin, which indeed became the identity of Israeli society as a whole? What are its characteristics? Its components? What are the events that shaped it and how was it structured?

### Personal biography and the reconstruction of the collective memory

In an effort to answer these questions, I analysed all the articles written about Yitzhak Rabin in the five national daily Hebrew newspapers during the period of the event. This included all biographical items that mentioned Rabin in two 'quality' papers — *Ha'aretz* and *Davar Rishon*; the two popular newspapers — *Yediot Abaranot* and *Ma'ariv*; and the business daily *Globes*, which also carries general news.

The corpus studied included all sections of the newspapers, all pages and all types of writing — news, features and commentary. In the first few days, there were more news stories, but the proportion of features increased during the period of mourning. The length of the articles varied widely, from short items to detailed profiles of 3500 words. In total, 348 articles of various length were analysed. They represented the main forum for public discourse — the daily newspapers' combined circulation soared during the week of the assassination to almost 1 million copies in print, which means that they reached almost 80 percent of Israeli households.<sup>10</sup>

A content analysis was performed on the texts. Items were graded on three variables: (1) mention of traits characteristic of Rabin or events of his life used to reflect traits characteristic of him (e.g. 'He was a hero and loved Israel' — Shalom Rosenfeld, *Ma'ariv*, 10 November 1995); (2) the comparative importance of various traits: importance was determined both by the number of appearances of each trait and the weight ascribed to it by the writer (e.g. 'Rabin was the most outstanding example of . . .' — Editorial, *Ha'aretz*, 5 November 1995); and (3) any explicit or implicit statement that this trait relates not just to Rabin the individual, but that it reflects the collective personality of Israeli society (example of an explicit statement: Yitzhak Rabin 'symbolized the new Israeli', Orit Harel, *Ma'ariv*, 10 November 1995; or 'the Palmachnik who is my private father, who is Rabin, who is the collective [father], my protector', Talma Admon, *Ma'ariv*, 10 November 1995).

Also studied were the linguistic techniques and methods used by the writers in reconstructing the collective biography. It was not always easy to establish causal connections between the traits/events related to Rabin the man and those related to the Israeli collective as a whole. Techniques commonly used to draw this connection were, for example, metaphor, metonymy or analogies. ('Yitzhak Rabin was the first Jewish flower to bloom in the earth of the homeland from out of the ashes of exile and the Holocaust', Gabriel Ben-Simchon, *Davar Rishon*, 19

November 1995). The solidarity theme also appeared frequently through use of the royal 'we' — not in the sense of 'I the king', but meaning 'You and I', to create a sense of involvement, a merging of the writer and the audience of readers into one cultural community, as in Meir Shalev's words: 'And the pining . . . for a generation of young people that is disappearing before our very eyes' or 'We'll continue along his restrained but determined path' (*Yediot Abaranot*, 6 November 1995).

What then is the reconstructed image of Rabin as it emerges from the contents of the media? The list below shows the six traits most often used to depict Rabin, both in terms of the number of times they were cited and the importance attributed to them by the writers. Additional traits appeared in the texts, but much less frequently than these (from several to 20 mentions). The first two traits appeared approximately 140 times, the third and fourth appeared up to 100 times each, while the last two traits appeared several dozen times.

The traits in order of relative importance were:

- Israeli sabra
- peacemaker
- Zionist
- Americophile
- anti-politician
- empathetic figure

In order to have a comparative sample for the content analysis of the texts published during the week of the assassination, a group of articles published in the previous three years, since Rabin became prime minister in 1992, was also examined. News, features and commentary were sampled from the same periodicals used in the post-assassination research, i.e. the five Hebrew dailies. These articles were deliberately chosen for their resemblance to those published after the assassination, i.e. they were longer; more comprehensive, descriptive or critical; and focused on Rabin's character, personality, methods of work or behaviour. However, this sample only consisted of 16 items and due to the fact that they had been published during a long period of three years, they could not have been compared with the same content analysis to the corpus of the 348 articles, and their reading was rather interpretative.

The term 'sabra' (native-born Israeli), like the 'Palmach generation' or 'the generation of 1948', is a broad, inclusive concept. In the newspapers, it appeared in its generalized 'sabra' form or as one or more components of the sabra archetype — warrior, unpolished but authentic,

straight-talking, a do-er, devoted to his comrades and willing to sacrifice himself for the good of the whole, and so forth. The components of this image are discussed at length in research about the myth of the sabra. 'The symbol of the new Jew, comely, with cowlick' (David Grossman, *Ma'ariv*, 6 November 1995). 'His image epitomizes the sabra spirit of the pre- and early-state period — straight-talking and to the point' (Hila Komem, *Davar*, 6 November 1995).

In describing the sabra, much use is made of the symbols of the period, images and metaphors taken from songs of the War of Independence and especially the world of the Palmach. This was

... a generation different and more wonderful than all the others — the Palmach generation. A generation that was the antithesis to the free-loader spirit, the antithesis to shirking one's duty, the antithesis to messianism, the antithesis to pomp and ceremony, the antithesis to extremism, the antithesis to demagoguery. It was a generation that spurned praise, but yes, a silver platter and yes, what comradeship. (Meir Shalev, *Yediot Aharonot*, 6 December 1995)

Naturally nothing negative or critical was linked to the concept of sabra or Palmachnik. In the past, the 'redheadedness' of the sabra or Palmachnik was a hook on which writers could hang negative qualities — oversimplification, hot-headedness, aggressiveness or lack of sophistication. Yoel Marcus (*Ha'aretz*) juxtaposed the negative redheadedness with the positive 'analytical mind' of Rabin. Following the assassination, however, the concept 'redhead' had only one meaning — all positive. 'A proud, sweet sabra with blonde curls and freckles on his nose. . . . We wanted to be like him' (Gabriel Ben-Simchon, *Davar Rishon*, 12 November 1995). The lack of polish of the sabra also undergoes a facelift that transforms it into a commendable quality: 'Rabin had an unpolished style, but there are two kinds of lack of polish: that of Weizmann, who stands beside Rabin's grave and says, "We drank, we ate . . ." Rabin's lack of polish was a kind of honesty . . . never crude' (Sami Michael, *Davar Rishon*, 5 December 1995).

The death of Rabin turned him into a 'peacemaker', the symbol of the longing and desire of Israeli society for peace. This element in his personality emerged prior to the assassination, of course, and winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995 reinforced this. However, prior to the assassination, Rabin was still being criticized for his hesitancy about the peace process, for the halting pace of progress (e.g. not evacuating Hebron or the tough policies towards Palestinians in the territories). The

assassination at the conclusion of a peace rally and in the context of opposition to his peace policies bolstered the transformation of his image vis-a-vis the Arab world. During the week of mourning, no texts appeared like those that had been frequent in the past describing the warrior-like, violent and tough side of Rabin ('break their bones', 'tighten the siege of Beirut' and so on). Indeed, even the military component of his personality, an aspect impossible to ignore, was used to emphasize his character as a man of peace. 'Soldier for peace', 'warrior for peace' and similar expressions appeared frequently. In a typical profile: 'The old soldier who led the state of Israel to victory in the Six Day War will now fight for peace' (Yael Gvirtz and Anat Meidan, *Yediot Aharonot*, 5 November 1995).

The longing for peace of the neo-Zionist stream is regarded among the other camps, especially among the fundamentalists, not as a noble expression of lofty goals, but as a product of weakness, short-sightedness, a reflection of materialistic, hedonistic, American values, a lack of national pride and historical consciousness, and even — among the extremists — as treason. Peace, formerly perceived by the neo-Zionists as instrumental, a deal, the product of weariness and an unwillingness to carry on the fight, was elevated through the restructured image of Rabin to the level of a value that holds its own against the values represented by the other streams.

The third concept frequently used by writers in describing Rabin is that of Zionism. In an editorial in *Ha'aretz* the day after the assassination, Rabin is described as 'a man who more than any other reflected the rebirth of Israel'. Zionism, as manifested in the descriptions of Rabin is elevated to supreme heights. In the words of Yaron London (*Yediot Aharonot*, 6 November 1995), Zionism is no less than 'the most daring and most successful social and national revolution in modern times'. The concept 'Zionism' embodies not just the simple, limited meaning — advocating the right of the Jewish people to gather in its historic homeland and enjoy national independence — but also its broader meaning: love of homeland, statehood, nation-building and state-building, the public over the private weal and collective values over individual rights. This was Rabin according to the new portrait, and this was and should be Israeli society. 'The only value remaining [in our era] is that of personal fulfilment, financial success. Rabin represents the complete opposite of this. He, who could have done things on his own behalf, never gave it a moment's thought' (Gabi Bashan, *Ma'ariv*, 9 November 1995).

The diplomatic chapter in the life of Rabin — serving as ambassador to Washington, followed by his special tie to the American nation and country — is a critical element in his personal biography and its collective meaning. The term 'diplomat' does not refer to the values, content or status of this profession. On the contrary, Rabin was described as an 'undiplomatic diplomat'. The heart of the matter was the partner, the United States. 'Rabin conducted an ongoing love affair with America ... which returned the compliment' (Akiva Eldar, *Ha'aretz*, 8 November 1995). The emphasis was on the fact that Rabin was Israel's most prominent ambassador to the USA 'and focused on fostering the strategic alliance between the two countries' (Moshe Zack, *Ma'ariv*, 6 November 1995).

Although Rabin based the foreign and defence policies of Israel on its links to the USA as an ultimate national resource, the description of his attitude to the USA goes beyond international relations and strategic considerations. Rabin is described as an authority on American society and politics, an unabashed advocate of American values and the American way of life and the importer of the American dream to Israel. Prior to the elections, Rabin was criticized more than once for his quasi-American, presidential style of governing (Yoel Marcus, *Ha'aretz*, 19 February 1993), for his exaggerated American orientation in both foreign affairs and defence (Uzi Benziman, *Ha'aretz*, 12 March 1993) and primarily for his republican values that replaced the social democratic underpinning of the labour movement. After his death, Rabin was portrayed as having imported to Israel an uncommonly positive product: 'American culture that won his heart ... the Protestant ethos, values, and beliefs ... etc.' (Gabi Bashan, *Davar Rishon*, 9 November 1995).

The deconstructed description of Rabin's personality is particularly dramatic in representing him as something other than a politician. Though Rabin was involved in political affairs while still in uniform during the War of Independence and held political jobs for 26 years after ending his army career, he was perceived as the antithesis of a politician. 'Rabin has never been a politician ... not a functionary, he was an outsider to the party ambience', according to Yael Gvirtz and Anat Meidan (*Yediot Aharonot*, 5 November 1995). In an era in which public criticism of politics was harsh and being a politician implied something negative, those who could avoid this label enjoyed a marked advantage. In the USA, the outsider — one who does not come up through the Washington corridors of power, but emerges from 'authentic' society — has an edge in running for president. But it's a little hard to define a

politician who spent a quarter of a century in Washington as an outsider. Perhaps this was an image that the politician Rabin created for himself? Rubik Rozental (*Davar Rishon*, 6 November 1995) suggests that in contrast with other politicians, 'Rabin never created for himself an image, but always remained himself.'

Of particular irony was the reconstructed image of Rabin as an empathetic figure — a devoted family man, someone who likes people, is surrounded by friends, amiable, sociable, sensitive to and concerned about others. This assortment of qualities was emphasized in particular throughout the event and yet it is in absolute contradiction to how Rabin was described throughout his public career — closed, introverted, lacking close friends, one whose body language and handshake expressed a painful shyness and discomfort with others, accused of never greeting the woman who served him tea every morning in Labour Party headquarters, as someone surrounded and influenced by a closed circle of patricians and the wealthy. But the portrait drawn of him after his death was diametrically opposed to this: '[He was] the opposite of a snob, never arrogant, he treated with equal respect and seriousness simple people and those with power and position' (Hila Komem, *Davar Rishon*, 6 November 1995). He who was described by the newspapers as 'autistic', whose hand gesture of impatience for and dismissal of others, even ministers in the government, was remarked on (Daniel Ben-Simon, *Davar*, 17 October 1994), now appears as 'sensitive and attentive, one who loved to converse and listened without interrupting' (Daniel Ben-Simon, *Davar*, 17 October 1994).

Keeping in mind that the issue is not which of these portrayals is 'accurate', but the very fact that a change did take place in describing Rabin during these two periods, and why, the conclusion appears obvious. The picture drawn of Rabin in the newspapers prior to the assassination was much more complex than that drawn afterwards. In almost all the articles prior to his death, negative expressions appear beside the positive expressions, and sometimes frequently. The change has less to do with a difference of opinion over his policies, which is less relevant for our discussion, but with the image, character and components of his personality and their symbolic significance. In fact, some of the positive expressions frequently mentioned the week after the assassination had never appeared at all in the past, though their opposite had been. It's not so surprising, then, that after the assassination, Rabin was transformed into the collective figure desired by the writers, since after all, in the words of Yonatan Gefen, 'He was us' (*Ma'ariv*, 6 November 1995).

### Conclusion: how hegemony won and lost

Who participated in the building of this version of the biography, a version that sought to give a particular character to the collective identity by linking it to the collective memory? Scrutiny of the writers whose articles, statements and quotes crammed the Hebrew press during this period reveals that these were representatives of three elite groups: the political, the media and the cultural. No real difference was found between direct statements — opinion pieces written by authors or politicians — and reportage written by professional journalists. No significant difference was found either in the ranking of traits/events among these three groups — cultural, media or political. The similarity among the three was so striking because all were members of one interpretive community.

Zelizer (1994) notes that the concept 'interpretive community' was taken up in fields beyond media research, and notes that it is not precisely a socioeconomic group, but distinguished by how it structures cultural forms and social reality. Thus, interpretive communities are culture groups in a sense broader than just media audiences.

Examination of the national media in the week of Rabin's assassination reveals the absence, disappearance, of major social and cultural groups from the public discourse. Most noticeably missing were the Arab community, the Russian immigrants, the 'other Israel' — referring to the residents of development towns of primarily Mizrahi origin — and, of course, the ultra-Orthodox and nationalist Zionists. All are interpretive communities with a different perception of reality, who are engaged in a struggle with each other, and particularly with the hegemonic group, over defining the collective identity of Israeli society. Their underrepresentation on television caused the leaders of the Arab population to protest to the Broadcasting Authority during the week of mourning that they were being excluded from the programmes.

The dominance, of the neo-Zionist discourse group over the editing tables in the newspapers and electronic media, the proximity of this group to the cultural-entertainment elite in Tel-Aviv, and the ideological-political affinity of this stream to the political elite were clearly reflected in the reaction to the assassination. Hence, it was not surprising to find a link between those who participated in shaping the collective profile, i.e. shaping the collective identity of Israel, and the specific characteristics of this identity. In fact, the image created during the reconstruction of the collective identity was that of the hegemonic interpretive community. In a liminal moment, Turner notes, a society looks upon itself and asks

not just who it is, but primarily who it wants to, feels it should, become (Turner, 1977). The reflection of the restructured image of Rabin is what this community wanted to become.

When Shils and Young studied the significance of the coronation ceremony in Britain, they regarded it as a symbol of the values that unify British society, the suppliers of consensus despite political differences (Shils and Young, 1953). Birnbaum took issue with this claim, well before Gramsci's concept of hegemony became popular. In *Monarchs and Sociologists*, Birnbaum argues that he is not at all sure that the interpretation of the ceremony by the various classes was identical. On the contrary, the ceremony expresses the values of the upper and middle classes, glossing over the social gap and conflict (Birnbaum, 1955). In this spirit, Lukes also analysed political rituals in Britain, noting that these rituals 'help to define as authoritative certain ways of seeing society' (Lukes, 1975: 306). It is an authoritative interpretation intended to serve the needs and interests of the ruling groups and to maintain their dominance.

In the Israeli context, the hegemonic interpretation of the collective identity by the neo-Zionist-Ashekenazi-Labour elite, which had been unchallenged since the formative years of the Israeli society, had faced a serious challenge in the last decade. The assassination was an extreme symbolic act of someone who wanted to undermine the authoritative position of that elite as the sole legitimate interpreter of the collective identity.

The ascension of what was perceived to be a real threat, and the crisis brought on by the assassination, caused the hegemonic elite to respond with all its power. A situation in which everything is fluid and in flux, which can be shaped and kneaded before it hardens, is a situation that must not be missed. Gramsci (1971) refers to a crisis as the moment of the blink in which frameworks are reorganized; what gels at this moment is solidified in the collective memory. Into these circumstances in which most members of the collective yearn for a different life, for a more desirable situation, the hegemony comes and offers its own model.

The Rabin myth constituted and disseminated by the media, in addition to the political ritual celebrated that week, was the most significant practice used by the hegemonic neo-Zionist groups to consolidate their position and worldview. To broaden their base of support, they initiated ties with the younger generation. The identification of the 'candle children' with the late prime minister caused an overnight change in the old-timers' attitudes towards the individualistic, pleasure-oriented culture of the younger generation. They were praised by spokespersons of the elite for their dedication to the peace process, the

ultimate goal of the Zionist movement. When the television management was asked why the live broadcasting from Rabin Square did not attract more youngsters to the spot, thus distorting reality rather than reporting it, the answer was 'this is where the important story takes place'.<sup>11</sup>

The feeling that the entire people in Israel reacted in a similar way to the political murder and shared the martyr's values and attributes was created because of the exclusion of other voices and the denial of access to the national media to the other interpretive communities. When, during the week's mourning, reporters presented some views of Israelis who thought differently about the assassination and its causes, these were censored by the editors. They felt 'the lesson of the tragic event was that we were too lenient about incitement. After the horrific event we had to be more strict about it' (see Note 2).

The official state institutions reacted similarly. The attorney-general issued new directives about freedom of expression, arguing that verbal incitement could harm the public order. The police hauled in some individuals who were disrespectful of Rabin's memory and several offenders who had been accused of incitement in the past two years but never tried suddenly received a trial date.

These actions aroused the ire of some civil rights organizations, and indeed the new policy was lifted after several weeks. The attorney-general, for example, restated his position as 'an ethical directive, not a binding legal order'. But that was too late. At 'the moment of the blink' — the significant moment in history in which a public debate ensues about issues fundamental to society, with various interpretive groups competing to bestow symbolic meaning on them — the critical discourse did not take place.

It took no less than five weeks for the first reservations to be heard publicly. Yoel Marcus, though a member of the hegemonic group and a senior journalist at *Ha'aretz*, expressed his reservations about the new, rose-coloured image of Yitzhak Rabin. The article was met with a harsh reaction from Rabin's widow, who announced that she would immediately cancel her subscription to the newspaper. Another month was needed before representatives of the other interpretive communities were able to protest in the general press about what had happened. The first, Yitzhak Laor, made his statement in reference to the memorial album for Rabin. Entitled 'Group Picture with Mirror', Laor's article criticized the literary wheeler-dealers, always close to the ruling powers, who demeaned themselves by exalting Rabin and served the goal of national unity by 'a Rabin festival ... as if there is no other way for culture other than

togetherness and kitsch, identity and unity, as if plurality that does not merge cannot exist' (*Ha'aretz*, 26 January 1996). The other writer, a prominent member of the fundamentalist stream and editor for many years of their journal *Nekuda*, forcefully attacked the Israeli media for 'taking sides in the debate', for presenting the views of only one political camp and not allowing other views to reach the public.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond this, no national media efforts were made by other groups to challenge the collective portrait of Israeli society as shaped by the cultural-political-media elite, or the monopoly it claimed in fashioning this portrait. They expressed their wrath at the media and the hegemonic group only in their internal media: Russian-language weeklies, synagogue newsletters, notices pasted up in their neighbourhoods and other community media. There the post-Zionist Russian immigrants could criticize the political ritual as 'a personality cult like the one we knew in the USSR', and the ultra-nationalists argued that 'Rabin has brought it [his death] upon himself because he betrayed the Jewish people'.<sup>13</sup>

Many more months had to pass before Israelis realized, after the Ministry of Education published the report of an investigative committee, that the teenagers who sat in Rabin Square singing and crying were only a fraction of their age group, while others, and not insignificant numbers, were critical of his policy, indifferent to the event or even supportive of the killing.<sup>14</sup>

The suppression of the public discourse during the period following the assassination did not result in the moulding of the Israeli collective memory or the reinvention of the entire Israeli collectivity. The other narratives, stories and aspirations, images and social forces were simply concealed, but they broke through and burst forth six months later in the May general elections, unveiling the tormented and shattered Israeli identity. In the Knesset, a 'coalition of minorities' — parties that represent the Russian, the nationalist, the religious and the ultra-Orthodox communities — have made unprecedented achievements. Prime Minister Shimon Peres, Rabin's partner and heir, had to hand his seat over to Binyamin Netanyahu, the leader of the Likud Party and the nationalist camp. No wonder the election results were described by the defeated camp as 'the second assassination of Rabin'.

#### Notes

1. I am deeply indebted to Elihu Katz for his valuable comments of an earlier version of this article.

2. Interview with Moshe Shlonsky, director of IDF radio, 17 December 1995. Information about Channel One was obtained in an interview with the director-general Ya'ir Stern on the same date. Interviews were also held with producers and programme writers for radio and television and with editors of the daily newspapers.
3. This is an estimate by the police, but various figures appeared in the newspapers. Although only an estimate, the magnitude speaks for itself.
4. In this context, see the views of Philip Smith, which are consonant with the neo-functionalist approach of J.C. Alexander. See Smith (1994).
5. Interview by the police investigators 25 December 1995, the police archive.
6. The foremost intellectual forum of the post-Zionist stream is the periodical *Teoriya U-Vikoret* and, of the fundamentalist stream, the monthly *Nekuda*.
7. A taste of this fascinating debate appeared in the daily *Ha'aretz* shortly before the assassination and immediately following, with contributions (between 12 September and 7 October) by Shlomo Avineri, Zeev Sternhell, Baruch Kimmerling and others. Also see the article by Mordechai Rotenberg in *Davar Rishon* (5 January 1996) and Oz Almog in *Ha'aretz* (19 December, 1995).
8. Yigal Amir claimed that his mission was to redeem the nation from Yitzhak Rabin. In Hebrew, 'Yigal' derives from the root 'ga'al', which means 'redeem' and 'Amir' contains the word *ami*, which means 'my nation'. The remaining 'Yi' and 'R' in his name are a reference to Yitzhak Rabin.
9. For the distinctions between 'speech community', 'discourse community' or 'community of memory', see Zelizer (1992: 89).
10. Other Hebrew periodicals were also examined, such as the weeklies *BaMahane* (published by the IDF), *Lalsba* (a women's magazine) and less regular periodicals that appeared after the assassination. However, as these magazines are directed to specific readers and not to the general public the results are not included in the report above.
11. See note 2.
12. Yisrael Harel in an interview on the television programme 'Sbetah Hefker' (27 December 1995).
13. In November 1996, the first anniversary of the assassination, such expressions were common in the alternative community media.
14. A letter from the director-general of the Ministry of Education, 8 October 1996. See also Rapoport (1997).

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## Satellite Television Viewing among Ethnic Minorities in France

■ Alec G. Hargreaves and Dalila Mahdjoub

### ABSTRACT

■ Minority ethnic viewers originating in Islamic countries are more densely equipped with satellite television receivers than the majority population in France. Very little research has so far been conducted on the impact of satellite channels. This article is based on a qualitative survey conducted among 115 viewers in 30 minority ethnic households, mainly of Maghrebi origin. Respondents were asked what they had expected of satellite programmes, how their viewing habits had changed with the installation of satellite receivers and how this had affected personal and family attitudes. The findings reveal major differences between first- and second-generation minority ethnic viewers, as well as significant variations related to gender. ■

**Key Words** ethnic minorities, France, Islam, Muslims, satellite television

### Introduction

The erosion of national boundaries by satellite television is nowhere more keenly felt than in France. Long-standing anxieties among French political elites over the Americanization of popular culture have recently been compounded by unease over the flow of television images from Islamic countries into the homes of immigrant families. France's Muslim

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