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Following in the footsteps of his father, a Zionist hero, toward a free and democratic Palestine

It took the murder of his niece to galvanize Miko Peled, son of IDF General Matti Peled who later became a champion of Palestinian rights, to follow a journey that has led him to embrace a democratic one-state solution.

By Hadani Ditmars | Apr.08, 2013 | 11:31 PM | 15

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Miko Peled speaking about his slain niece, Smadar Elhanan. Photo by Hadani Ditmars

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Turbulent Middle East will only strengthen U.S.-Israel alliance

I strongly disagree with those voices in Washington that advocate disengagement in the face of the challenges of the Middle East. We cannot stand up for America's interests - or Israel's - from the sidelines.

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VANCOUVER – If Miko Peled's memoir "The General's Son" were made into a movie, it would open with this scene: In his San Diego home in 1997, while casually watching CNN, he catches a glimpse of a young girl on a stretcher.

There's been a suicide bombing on Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem. As if

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on cue, he receives a phone call from his mother in Israel saying that his 13-year-old niece Smadar, daughter of his sister Nurit, is missing. Somehow, he knows instinctively she's the girl he saw on TV.

This fear is confirmed several agonizing hours later, when her body is found at a morgue.

He must fly back to Israel immediately, as the state funeral for the granddaughter of General Matti Peled, the Independence War hero who later became a far-left politician, awaits his return.

Among those expressing condolences is Benjamin Netanyahu – a close childhood friend of his sister Nurit. His politics make him an unwelcome guest in the home where the family is sitting shiva. But among the mourners who greet his family is Ehud Barak, the newly elected leader of the opposition, who explains that in order to win votes he must disguise his real intentions as a “peacemaker.”

Suddenly galvanized by his niece's death into reviving the activism he flirted with as a young IDF commando – disillusioned with the abuse of Palestinians he'd witnessed and the first Lebanon war – Peled blurts out to the future prime minister, “Why not tell the truth ... That this and similar tragedies are taking place because we are occupying another nation and that in order to save lives the right thing to do is to end the occupation and negotiate a just peace with our Palestinian partners?”

Barak dismisses his outburst as political naivete.

This moment in 1997 marks the beginning of a powerful personal and political journey, recounted in Peled's new book in a style that is part confessional, part cinematic epic and part emotional appeal for “different answers” to the Israeli-Palestinian conundrum.

By the time the book is over, he has gone from adoring son of IDF general turned peace activist, to young Israeli traveler searching for meaning in life, to an activist embracing a democratic one-state solution

Parts of his journey (his pride as a boy in his father's bravery as a general, his time traveling in India after his military service) are familiar Israeli narratives, but his father's legacy and his unique insights into that make his story particularly compelling.

Over coffee at a Vancouver hotel, in the midst of his ongoing book tour, Peled admits to “exploiting” his unique position as part of the Israeli elite (“All the general's sons grew up together in [Jerusalem's upscale] Rehavia, went to school together ... the prime minister lived down the street”) to make people listen.

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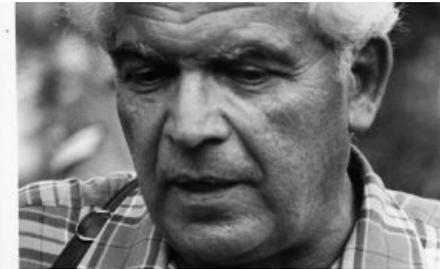
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General Matti Peled was an MK for a far-left, Jewish-Arab party in the 1980s. Photo by Uzi Keren

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“Personal narratives are always stronger than any history book,” the 51-year-old Peled asserts, citing both the crux of his book’s currency, as well as the importance of the lecture series he began with a Palestinian counterpart in San Diego that planted the seeds of his memoir.

“In terms of Israeli history and psyche,” comments the tall, handsome Peled, who bears an uncanny resemblance to a young George Bush, “this story touches on every single nerve in Israeli society. It starts with the third aliyah, the generation of my grandparents in the 1920s [one set were part of the working class that built roads and cities, he explains in his book, while the other were intellectuals, his maternal grandfather none other than Zionist leader Avraham Katsnelson] through to my father’s generation – the heroes of 1948 and 1967 and on to my father’s pack of Israeli renegades who spoke to Arafat when it was still illegal. Then there’s bereavement and the suicide attack ...”

And then, of course, there is the “small group of Israelis,” says Peled, who are challenging old narratives about the nature of the nation’s founding and exploring new possibilities for peace.

But it was only due to a twist of fate that Peled has come this far on his journey. A key turning point in the Peled narrative was a decision he made, as a burgeoning young activist and earnest student of karate, one night in 1983. To avoid missing his karate class, a young Peled decided to forgo attending a Peace Now demonstration in Jerusalem. That night, a right-wing extremist threw a grenade at the crowd, killing activist Emil Grunzweig and injuring several others.

Peled took this as a sign, and followed the path of karate – a practice of non-violence, he says, that teaches one to “overcome insurmountable obstacles” – one that took him to Japan and eventually to San Diego, where he settled with his wife and family.

But the shock of his niece’s death jolted him back into Middle Eastern reality. “The activist side of me that I’d been suppressing,” he explains, “suddenly burst out. It became stronger than anything.”

His sister Nurit’s adamant stance that the occupation was to blame for her daughter’s death was also a key factor.

“She said, ‘no real mother would want this to happen to another mother,’”

recalls Peled, “and for me that crystallized how morally unjustifiable retaliation is.”

He began to question many of the assumptions he grew up with, even in a relatively radical household where he came of age going to Land Day protests with his father, and defending him when schoolmates called him a “traitor.”

Eventually he sought out and joined a Jewish/Arab discussion group in San Diego, and found that the Jewish Americans he met – with their “New York humor and deli food” – were more foreign than the hummus, tabouleh and warm hospitality offered by his new Palestinian friends. He was shocked by random anti-Arab venom spewed casually by Jewish Americans he met who assumed he shared their views, in an atmosphere of growing Islamophobia.

In his San Diego dialogue group, he found a worthy partner in Nader Elbanna, a Palestinian from Nazareth who accompanied him on a dual lecture series at rotary clubs – one that led to organizing shipments of wheelchairs to Israel/Palestine. Soon frustrated by the limitations of humanitarianism, Peled gravitated toward activism. Despite his “deeply ingrained fears” of traveling alone in Palestinian areas, he found himself instead warmly welcomed by nonviolent protestors in Bil’in and then detained by Israeli soldiers for illegally entering Area A.

When he was brought before an Israeli policeman, the policeman chided the soldiers saying, “Look, he’s an Israeli citizen and has rights. It’s not a Palestinian that I can just beat up and throw in prison.”

Peled went on to teach karate to Palestinian children in refugee camps, often overwhelmed by the brutality they faced under occupation but impressed by their resilience and “heroism.”

While Peled’s concerns are genuine, his tales of traveling in Palestine can seem slightly romanticized. But the stories of his father – pieced together from childhood memories, interviews with family and Israeli archives – are fascinating. We learn of Issam Sartawi, the senior PLO figure later assassinated by Abu Nidal, calling to arrange a series of clandestine meetings that helped pave the path to the Oslo Accords. If a young Miko happened to answer the phone he was told, “it’s the ‘friend’ calling.”

“When I heard that,” he writes, “I would be filled with a sense of excitement and importance, and would rush to get my father.”

After such calls, his father (who was fluent in Arabic and went on to become an expert in Arabic literature) would fly off to some remote North African location or to a Parisian rendezvous, and return a week or so later to brief then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. But Matti Peled’s eventual disenchantment with the Oslo Accords – and one that abruptly ended his lifelong friendship with Rabin – is no secret.

Peled relates that in a late 1994 interview his father said, “The Palestinians might be allowed to collect their own garbage and issue their own passports, but this mini-state would ultimately be controlled by Israel.” One of the last pieces he wrote before his death in 1995 was called “A requiem to Oslo.”

The general – still called Abu Salam by many of the same Palestinians whose occupation he helped orchestrate – and the contradictions he

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embodied were powerful catalysts for his son's own journey. But now, Peled seems to think that pragmatism and inertia will win the day.

"We have more important similarities than differences," he affirms. He has already spoken in Gaza and Ramallah, but will wait until the book is translated into Hebrew before launching a speaking tour in Israel.

Among those commonalities between Israelis and Palestinians, he cites large educated middle classes who are equally suspect of their "corrupt elites" as they are of their "fringe religious extremists," and people who "just want to get on with their lives."

"If there were a democratic single state tomorrow," he argues, "would people vote along ethnic or religious lines? Or would they vote for someone who promised better schools, roads and lower taxes? I think the latter."

He insists that the one-state solution is closer than one might imagine. "There's already integration on certain levels – in the hospitals for instance there are many talented Palestinian doctors. But they don't enjoy the benefits of the state even though they contribute to it – and that's just not sustainable."

Peled mentions the BDS movement, shifting world opinion and the rejection of Israeli policies by American Jews and Holocaust survivors who refuse to be "represented" by the Jewish state as signs that "the transformation is already taking place."

The one-state solution is inevitable, he says, "not because Israelis are changing," but because the current situation cannot continue.

"Israelis are going to wake up one day and see that there's a new reality," he says.

While critics of the one state solution – including members of his own family – fear it could end up like another Kosovo, Peled counters, "why not Belgium or Switzerland?"

"The choice is ours," says the general's son a few minutes before heading off on another speaking engagement, noting both peoples' ability to create a peaceful, secular state with equal rights for all. "And I think that Israelis and Palestinians will make the right choice."

"Ultimately," he says, looking at the picture of General Peled on the cover of his book, "We are fathers before we are nationalists."

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