

{DECEMBER 10, 2005}

THE CURSE OF THE GODS

This week I was strolling through the streets of Athens, at the foot of the Acropolis, when my eye was caught by a sign bearing one single word in Greek letters: Sisyphus. It was the name of a taverna.

Perhaps the gods wanted to remind me of an article I wrote 14 years ago, entitled “The Revenge of the Gods”. Its tragic hero was the man I called “Shimon Sisyphus”.

The original Sisyphus was, of course, the king of Corinth, a sinful, lying man of intrigue. He ratted on Zeus, the God-in-Chief, who was, as was his wont, dallying with human beauties.

As a punishment, Sisyphus was sent to Hades, condemned to roll a heavy stone up a hill. Every time the stone was approaching the top of the hill, it slipped down again. And so on, to the end of time.

That had been the fate of Shimon Peres at the time I wrote that article, and that has been his fate since then, too, up to this very day. I don’t know what made the Greek gods mete out this punishment, but throughout the years Peres has proved that he deserves it.

If there was any doubt about this, the last few days provided confirmation. Peres committed an act of political prostitution. If he had just left the Labor Party before the primaries and joined the competition – well enough. After all, Ariel Sharon has done the same. But Peres ran for party chairman, and only after he was roundly defeated, did he go over to Sharon’s new party.

No doubt, Peres brought the curse on himself. He will continue to roll the stone up, and the stone will continue to slip down every time, just when it seems about to reach the top.

Already in 1953, when he was a mere 30, he was appointed Director General of the powerful Ministry of Defense. That was an amazing promotion. He was the protege of the almighty David Ben-Gurion, the Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, who handed him control of the huge defense establishment. He could well expect that in due

course the Old Man would turn the prime minister's office over to him. In the meantime, in 1959, he was elected to the Knesset and appointed Deputy Minister of Defense.

And then he was struck by disaster. In 1963, Ben-Gurion was driven out of office and – quite literally – into the desert. Peres remained dangling. He made himself agreeable to the successor, Levy Eshkol, who became Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, and was busy trying to restore his standing when the stone slipped from his grasp again: Ben-Gurion returned suddenly from his retreat in the desert and founded a new party, Rafi. Peres could not really refuse to join him. With obvious reluctance he resigned his post and left the Labor party (then called Mapai). But he hoped that with Ben-Gurion's victory he would still reach the top.

He threw himself into the work of building the new party, setting up local branches, conducting the election campaign. He was sure that a party led by the legendary Old Man, with the participation of the glorious Moshe Dayan and several other generals, would win a resounding victory. How could it be otherwise? But election day, in November 1965, brought a bitter disappointment: Rafi won only 10 (out of 120) Knesset seats, and their location on the political map condemned them to irrelevancy. (This example sweetens the dreams of Likud functionaries, who hope that the same will now happen to Sharon, who has started a similar adventure.)

After two years, a life-saver was thrown to Rafi. The savior was none other than the Egyptian leader, Gamal Abd-al-Nasser, who massed his army in the Sinai desert, threatening Israel. The country was seized by panic, Rafi was invited to join an emergency government, and its representative became Minister of Defense. But it was not Peres, who labored so hard for Rafi, but Moshe Dayan, who had not lifted a finger. The staggering victory in the Six-day war made Dayan the idol of the masses, while Peres was left on the sidelines. The stone had slipped again to the bottom of the hill.

Peres understood that he had no chance in a small party. He brought Rafi back into the Labor Party (now called Ma'arakh) and received as consolation prize the unimportant Ministry of Transportation. Ben-Gurion regarded this as an act of treason by his protege and founded another small party, the State List.

The great opportunity arrived in 1974, a few months after the Yom Kippur war. The war looked like a national disgrace, and the two persons responsible for that, Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan, until then national icons, were sent packing. The way was clear for a new Prime Minister, and it seemed as if the job would fall into the lap of Peres like a ripe fruit. But at the last moment Yitzhak Rabin, a political greenhorn, appeared out of nowhere and plucked the fruit. He was selected by the party.

Peres, hurt to his innermost soul, was compelled to make do with the Ministry of

Defense. He spent the next three years working relentlessly to undermine Rabin, who later described him as an “Untiring Conspirator”. For this purpose, and in order to gain the sympathy of right-wingers, Peres founded Kedumim, the first settlement in the heart of the Arab population of the West Bank.

The cruel gods decided to mock him again. Rabin was involved in a trifling affair – contrary to the prevailing law, his wife had neglected to close a bank account that he had kept while serving as ambassador in Washington – and resigned. At long last, Peres became the chairman of the party. At the start of the election campaign of 1977, his victory was assured and he already busied himself with selecting his ministers, when the unimaginable happened: Menachem Begin, the eternal opposition leader who had been defeated in one election campaign after another, won and became Prime Minister. Peres had to bear the responsibility, Rabin’s hands were clean. The stone had again slipped to the bottom.

In the next elections, 1981, the gods played an even more sadistic trick. When the ballots closed, the pollsters announced that Labor had won. Radiant with happiness, Peres let himself be declared the next Prime Minister. And then it became clear that Begin had won after all.

The continuation was bitter. Begin accepted the advice of his new Minister of Defense, Ariel Sharon, and invaded Lebanon. The day before the tanks rolled, Peres publicly announced his support. There followed the occupation of Beirut, the Sabra and Shatila massacre, the dismissal of Sharon, the mental breakdown of Begin. The public started to detest the war. Peres was sure that this time he would win. But the winner was Begin’s successor, Yitzhak Shamir.

The next years were a series of ups and downs. Again and again Peres almost reached the top. Once he even became Prime Minister for some time, but only owing to a peculiar Israeli invention: a rotating Prime Ministership in a “national unity” government after an impasse with Shamir at the polls. As Prime Minister he had one real success: together with a talented Finance Minister, Yitzhak Moda’i, he brought inflation down from 400% to normal.

But the urge to become Prime Minister by his own efforts was too strong: he organized a putsch in the national unity government to displace Shamir and to seize power with the help of the religious ministers. But they betrayed him at the last moment and he had to leave the government altogether. Rabin, in his inimitable style, called the episode, “Peres’s stinking exercise”.

On the eve of the 1992 elections, Peres’ chances looked good. The public was fed up with the Likud. Victory was beckoning the Labor Party. But the fruit was again snatched from him: the party nominated Rabin. Peres had to be content with a

secondary post – as Foreign Minister, who in Israel is less important than the Defense and Finance ministers.

People who talked with Peres at that stage got the impression that he had finally given up the ambition of ever getting to the top of the hill. For the first time, he really cooperated with Rabin, and the two together created the miracle of Oslo. Both had been long-term advocates of the “Jordanian Option” (handing the occupied Palestinian territories to the Jordanian king), but the intifada finally convinced them to recognize the Palestinian people and come to an agreement with the PLO. When it was decided to award the Nobel Peace Prize to Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, Peres moved heaven and earth to be included as well. Since the prize can be given to three people at most, the fourth partner, Mahmoud Abbas, was unjustly left out.

But the gods did not relent. In November 1995, Rabin was assassinated. The assassin, who was waiting at the foot of the staircase, let Peres, who was within touching distance, walk safely by. He was appointed by the party to take Rabin’s place as Prime Minister.

This was the opportunity of his life. He could call for new elections and surely ride to a landslide victory on the wave of public outrage at the murder. But Peres did not want to owe his election to Rabin’s memory. He postponed the election for a few months, during which he started a small war in Lebanon that ended in disaster – the massacre of refugees by mistake. Then he okayed the assassination of a Hamas militant, the legendary bomb-maker Yihyeh Ayash, provoking a series of bloody retaliatory suicide attacks that ruined Peres’ chances.

On election day, the gods repeated their sadistic trick: it looked as if Peres had won. Late in the night it became clear that the opposite had happened. A new phrase was born: “We went to sleep with Peres and woke up with Netanyahu!”

At one of the party meetings, Peres asked what was meant to be a rhetorical question: “What, am I a loser?” and was dismayed by a chorus of replies: “Yes! Yes!”

It seemed as if the gods had lost interest. Binyamin Netanyahu assumed power and was soon detested by the public. The government fell, and Labor won the elections. But the hero was not Peres, but Ehud Barak, a former army Chief-of-Staff, whose election aroused wild enthusiasm, which, in turn, turned quickly into bitter disappointment that degenerated into a despair of peace and the collapse of the Left. In 2001 Barak lost to Sharon by a landslide, the party luminaries could not agree among themselves on a successor, and asked Peres to assume the party leadership “temporarily” as a stop-gap. As usual, he immediately began turning “temporary” into permanent.

On the way, another accident befell him. The post of President of the State fell vacant. Peres lusted for the position, which is empty of practical content but full of

prestige. The President is elected by parliament in a secret vote. Most members assured Peres of their support. The alternative candidate was a second-rank Likud functionary, one Moshe Katzav. But when the envelopes were opened, it appeared that the impossible had happened again: Peres had lost this contest, too.

In order to keep his international standing, Peres led his party into the Sharon government, in return for a newly invented title: “Vice Prime Minister”. For this empty appellation, he sold the soul of the party. He used his international prestige to cultivate respectability for Sharon throughout the world, where Sharon was remembered as the man of Sabra and Shatila. For this alone, Peres deserves everything that was coming to him.

The Labor ministers supported not only the Gaza withdrawal – a good thing in itself – but also all the acts of oppression in the West Bank: the expropriation of land, the expansion of the settlements, inaction on the “removal of the outposts”, the construction of the monstrous wall and the campaign of targeted assassinations, while boycotting the Palestinian Authority. Peres himself condemned the Thatcherist economic policy of the government as “swinish capitalism”, while continuing to support it unstintingly in practice.

The end – for the time being – came a few weeks ago. In the past, Amir Peretz had left the Labor Party to found his own small workers’ party. Peres himself had convinced him to come back into the fold. Now he contested Peres’ post as party chairman – and won. Taking revenge on the party, Peres left it for the second time in his life and joined Sharon, as he had once joined Ben-Gurion.

Now Sharon uses Peres as bait to lure fish from the Labor party, but would not dream of putting him on his list of party candidates for the Knesset. That would have repelled a lot of Likud members from joining him. It is doubtful whether he will really honor his promise to Peres to give him a respectable job if he wins the elections – perhaps the post of President, after Katzav finishes his term.

There is something deeply tragic in this story. All his life, Peres has pined for the love of the public, and every time he has been jilted. This man, a professional and incredibly persevering politician from the age of 18, has never won an election. Israelis wonder why he enjoys so much prestige throughout the world. The rest of the worlds why he cannot win an election in Israel.

Was it because he was an immigrant in an era of native-born Sabras? Was it the Polish accent, that he was unable to get rid of? Something in his character? The lack of charisma? The fact that he never served in the army? Perhaps some combination of all these?

The gods surely know.