

## Notes from Israel

# The old man won't give up

An old man of 94, president Shimon Peres, is still chasing his dream in a Middle Eastern scenario reduced to rubble, plagued by failure and un-extinguishable hatred. He is the last politician of his generation, and still won't give up: "I'll live to see peace in the Middle East".

by Manuela Dviri

On May 1st, after visiting the recently elected Pope Francis and the newly appointed Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, Israeli President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shimon Peres arrived in Assisi to receive his honorary citizenship from the Mayor of the town Claudio Ricci, many other dignitaries and hundreds of Franciscan friars.

Shimon Peres is a unique figure. To try and get a handle on him, just check out his Facebook page and read the quotes and one-liners he's always trotting out in quick succession, to his immense personal enjoyment.

Long-lived, creative, curious, the hardest of workers, an eternal and incurable optimist, he is one of the most famous (and, these days, rare) Israeli politicians to still firmly believe in the Middle East Peace Process. "I will see peace in the Middle East before I die", he always says, casting a glance at his young collaborators and adding, before bursting out with laughter, "You, I'm not sure about you".

For Shimon Peres, "Dreaming is simply being pragmatic". One of the greatest contributions Jews (and Peres) have made to humanity is eternal dissatisfaction: "Whatever other people do, we always think we can do it better!"

He also believes that working hours should be cut and the number of hours spent studying increased. "Who says you need to work eight hours a day?", he adds. "It would be enough to work four hours and then study for four hours, that way teaching would become a new industry". Conversely he suggests university students should be required to spend at least two hours a day in a job: "That way they would learn at least as much as at university!"

To prove his point, he too works and studies, even past the age of ninety. He says he wakes up every morning at six, does some exercise and then reads an ebook a day, watches the news (on the computer), uses a tablet, travels far and wide in Israel and the world, and meets hundreds of people on a daily basis. He is in excellent health, is always on a diet but is always ready to appreciate good food, and radiates such an intense energy that he leaves his collaborators (all women) completely exhausted. "Assisi is a city with the most remarkable history", Peres was heard saying on his visit to St. Francis' birthplace. "Francesco di Bernardone dedicated his life to fighting poverty, seeking peace and embracing the value of humility. (...) Even if our world has become global, it should remain moral as well...". He added: "Today, all efforts



designed to end hunger, diminish ignorance and save the lives of millions of children, will also save the future". I must confess, I've known Peres for many years now and I've heard him make these same pronouncements countless times, always with the same stubbornness and sincerity. I started working with him, or rather the Peres Centre for Peace, many years before his election as president. In 2003, the Peres Centre started the project Saving Children: Science Serving Peace (no connection to Save the Children). A very simple and extraordinary initiative, as dear to Peres as it is to me. It offers sick Palestinian children free treatment in Israeli hospitals when the kind of medical services they require cannot be accessed through the Palestinian



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healthcare system. There is a huge need for very sophisticated medical treatments for children. More than 50% of the Palestinian population is under the age of 15 and the proximity of modern Israeli medical institutions makes the project incredibly practical and simple. After all, what could be easier than to treat a Palestinian child in an Israeli hospital just a few kilometres away?

My involvement began with an article I wrote for *Il Corriere della Sera* in 2003, about a sick Palestinian boy. Since then, I've travelled the length and breadth of Italy, year after year, to find people to help realise our dream. In these ten years we have raised sufficient funds to treat almost 10,000 children. It has been a miraculous project and, personally speaking, perhaps the greatest victory of my life.

I'm writing about it once again because times have changed and we are having a very hard time to find even the most basic level of resources necessary to continue our work. In the last few hours the project's director has called me numerous times in desperation. For months now she's been fighting against the almost inevitable closure of the project due to lack of funds. It would be an unimaginable tragedy for the children's parents – and for us all. Because children cannot be left to die. As the grand old man of Israeli politics says and believes, "Saving the lives of children also means saving our future (...) and science was and always will be neutral. Human beings transform science into a blessing or a curse, out of their own volition".

I think St. Francis of Assisi would agree with him. **E**



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📍 Vatican City, 30 April 2013, Pope Francis meets the Israeli President Shimon Peres in a private hearing in the Library of the Apostolic Palace.

📍 Shimon Peres with Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook. The Israeli president is a great believer in social networks.