

Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

November 7, 1995

In this issue:

- Leaders mourn while experts ponder lessons of Rabin slaying
- Israelis mourn slain prime minister Rabin
- Clinton's pastor chosen to lead Arkansas Baptists
- Mississippi Baptists approve change in home missions funding
- House offers D.C. students money for religious schools

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Historical Commission, SBC
Nashville, Tennessee

Leaders mourn while experts ponder lessons of Rabin slaying

By Bob Allen

JERUSALEM (ABP) -- World leaders mourned slain Israeli leader Yitzhak Rabin, including American governmental and religious leaders, while observers pondered what his assassination means to the tenuous peace process underway in the Middle East.

In remarks at Rabin's Nov. 6 funeral, President Clinton called the slain prime minister "haver," the Hebrew word for friend, and quoted a Bible passage shared by Jews and Christians. "As Moses said to the children of Israel, when he knew he would not cross over into the Promised Land, be strong and of good courage, fear not for God will go with you. He will not fail you. He will not forsake you," Clinton said, alluding to Deuteronomy 31:6.

"As you stay the course of peace, I make this pledge: neither will America forsake you," added Clinton, a Southern Baptist.

Southern Baptist Convention President Jim Henry attended Rabin's funeral at Clinton's invitation as a member of the official U.S. delegation.

Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, Fla., said Clinton's remarks revealed a deep friendship with Rabin. "He was very somber. He looked like he had been weeping to me. His tribute was very good. He embraced Mrs. Rabin," Henry said.

Henry said he also stood in line to express condolences and pledge prayers for Leah Rabin, but she was whisked away just before he was able to reach her.

Henry said the trip brought back poignant memories of October 1994, when he was part of another delegation attending the signing of a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan and he was photographed in a celebrative mood with Rabin.

Henry urged Southern Baptists to pray for Rabin's successor, interim prime minister Shimon Peres, and the ongoing peace process. "We need to pray that Peres and those he works with in the Mideast can move through with this process. It is a very narrow window he has to move through," he said.

The Baptist Convention of Israel sent messages of condolences to the offices of the prime minister and to Rabin's widow.

Evangelist Billy Graham asked Christians to pray that the hatred and violence that beset the Middle East will give way to compassion and tolerance.

"Modern Israel truly has lost one of its greatest leaders," Graham said, "and the world has lost a valiant and courageous champion of peace."

Thomas Hocutt, a Southern Baptist worker who relates to churches in Israel, said most citizens there are shocked a Jew would turn to violence against other Jews. "The Jewish people have prided themselves that they have not had this kind of thing happen before," Hocutt said.

Hocutt said the shock of Jew-against-Jew violence "may well open people's minds and hearts to the fact that nothing is certain. In that sense it might be good for people to ask questions about what life is about; 'Where is God?'"

Hocutt said he was in Jordan with a group of Israeli and Palestinian Christians when he heard news of Rabin's death. "We shared the tragedy together in prayer and mutual support," he said. "We shared a common burden and it was wrapped up in a common grief."

Chris Leighton, executive director of the Maryland Interfaith Project's Institute for Christian-Jewish Studies, said Rabin's murder points to the inherent dangers of inflammatory political rhetoric.

"Polemics and diatribe can so easily spin out of control," Leighton said.

"There are two kinds of easy responses to the assassination. One is to say (the assassin) is crazy, to say he is part of a lunatic fringe, that allows the public to distance itself from this character," Leighton said.

"The fact is he represents an extremist position that is powerfully articulated at various points within the tradition."

"The other characteristic response is to say 'I was surprised by what happened. Jews don't kill Jews.' If we were more attentive to the power of language we shouldn't be surprised," Leighton added.

Leighton said he hopes Americans will apply lessons from Rabin's death to their own culture.

"These tendencies are very much operative not just in the context of the Middle East but our own context," Leighton said.

"My sense is what Israel is dealing with certainly extends well beyond the borders of Israel. It concerns more than just the Jewish community. The dangers of religious rhetoric that incites violence is a tremendous problem here. It seems to me the appropriate response is to look at the incendiary quality of a good bit of our discourse," he said.

"I think we really need to scrutinize how we talk about each other," Leighton said. "The ways liberals talk about conservatives and conservatives talk about liberals -- the so-called culture wars -- I think that kind of framing of issues certainly gets good play in the media, but I think needs to be eschewed."

James DeLoach, a Southern Baptist and long-time advocate of a strong Israel, termed Rabin's assassination "a tragedy" but noted many Israelis were troubled by the prime minister's policies.

"It's a tragedy when any good man's life is taken, and there is no question that Mr. Rabin was exactly that," said DeLoach, a retired pastor who now works as a consultant and revival leader in Fairhope, Ala.

"Anyone who reads the press knows there has been a division in Israel for a very long time and especially over the land-for-peace concept," he added. "Those of us who have been friends of Israel for many, many years find that a difficult concept."

Still, DeLoach said, he knows no one in Israel who defends Rabin's murder. "The people I know in Israel are all grieved with the death of Mr. Rabin, no question about it. I don't know anybody in Israel that would rejoice in Mr. Rabin's death."

"Here is a man with almost a Nathaniel-like quality. Here is an Israelite in whom there is no guile. You never had to wonder what Mr. Rabin's agenda was."

DeLoach described himself as "very much pro-Israeli." "The reason I am is my understanding of the biblical message," he added.

DeLoach said he has traveled to Israel frequently but has no formal links to any pro-Israel organization. He acknowledged he has been identified with a controversial Zionist movement that advocates recapturing the Temple Mount for rebuilding of the Jewish Temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D., but that he does not personally advocate building a temple.

The Dome of the Rock, one of the holiest spots of Islam, now occupies the site where the Jewish Temple built by King Solomon once stood. Some Christians believe the Bible prophesies the Temple will be rebuilt prior to the Second Coming of Jesus.

"There are Israelites who are my friends who are very much interested in building the Temple," DeLoach said. "I have been accused of wanting to rebuild the Temple. I just know it's going to be rebuilt."

"Every time something dramatic happens in Israel it raises the question of when it is going to be rebuilt," DeLoach said.

But Leighton of the Institute of Christian-Jewish Studies, urged Christians to use such terms with care.

"The theological categories we use to define what it means to be a Christian are loaded," Leighton, a Presbyterian minister, said. "Our eschatology frequently carries quite a payload. I think we need to be rather vigilant about the kinds of apocalyptic imagery we employ."

-30-

-- The news staff at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board contributed to this story.

Israelis mourn slain prime minister Rabin

JERUSALEM (ABP) -- Yitzhak Rabin, an Israeli war hero who as the nation's prime minister devoted himself to the pursuit of peace, died Nov. 4, slain by an assassin's bullet.

Police charged 27-year-old Yigal Amir, a fringe activist with no record of violence, with shooting Rabin three times at close range with a 9 mm pistol. A third-year law student, Amir reportedly told interrogators he killed Rabin because he believed the prime minister was a traitor, giving away Israel's God-given birthright to the Palestinians.

Investigators were unsure if Amir acted alone. He has been associated with the radical right-wing group known as Eyal. Amir said he was acting on orders from God.

Police found on Amir's bookshelf a copy of "The Day of the Jackal," a thriller about a political assassination, and writings by Baruch Goldstein, the Jewish settler who killed 29 Muslims in the West Bank city of Hebron in 1994.

Shimon Peres, Rabin's long-time political rival and partner in the peace process, was named interim prime minister.

Rabin, 73, was first elected prime minister in 1974. Succeeding Golda Meir, he was the youngest and first native-born Israeli to hold the office. A scandal forced him to abandon his bid for re-election, however. During his campaign it was disclosed he had violated Israeli currency rules by maintaining a bank account in the United States.

He won the post a second time in 1993, ending nearly a decade of rule by the conservative Likud Party, and set out to claim peace for his nation.

Since its birth in 1948, the state of Israel's history has been marked by conflict with its Arab neighbors.

In 1967, Rabin, then chief of staff, led Israeli forces in the Six-Day War, turning back Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Syria to take control of the West Bank of the Jordan River, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights.

Israel's long, slow road toward peace began in 1978 with the historic Camp David peace accords with Egypt.

In September 1993, Rabin and Peres signed another historic peace pact with Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The White House signing ceremony laid a framework for ending nearly 30 years of armed struggle between the PLO and the government of Israel. Because of those negotiations, the three men shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994.

Jordan signed a peace accord with Israel in October 1994.

Syria remains the primary holdout in peace negotiations in the Middle East. Ongoing talks are tied to the demand that Israel surrender the Golan Heights -- seized most recently by Israel in a 1981 war as a strategic buffer on the border with Syria -- in exchange for full diplomatic recognition for Israel.

Long-term peace with Lebanon depends on the outcome of the Syrian-Israeli talks.

Public support in Israel for the peace process has been split about 50-50. Observers say Rabin's reputation as a military hero helped him lead the peace initiative because Israelis trusted him not to endanger national security. Some wonder if Peres, Rabin's long-time party rival and recent partner in the peace process, will instill that kind of confidence. Peres has a reputation as an idealist and a dreamer, contrasting with Rabin's image as a hard-nosed realist.

Even criticism of Rabin has grown more hostile over time. Recent placards carried by some right-wing demonstrators depicted the prime minister in a Nazi uniform, an image that once would have been thought unthinkable in the nation established in the ashes of the Holocaust.

Others hope, meanwhile, that Rabin's death will serve as a wake-up call and result in a backlash against opponents to the peace process. The leader of the rival Likud Party, Benjamin "Bebe" Netanyahu, who is running for prime minister in next year's election on a platform of slowing the peace process, quickly distanced himself from the shooting, which many blame on Israel's right wing.

"I've heard some people say, 'Thank God it was not an Arab,' and because it was a right-wing Jewish extremist that there's a better chance that the peace process will now be able to go forward since they can invoke the category of martyr quite appropriately," said Chris Leighton, executive director of the Maryland Interfaith Project's Institute for Christian-Jewish Studies.

"There are others that feel that maybe in the very short run it will make some difference, but there's going to be a vacuum of leadership -- that Peres is too dovish to build broad support. There's a sense the long-term peace prospects could be enormously bleak without having an articulate champion of the peace process who can garner the trust of groups that for very good reasons are highly suspicious and scared. I'm not sure anybody on the scene right now is going to be able to pull it off," Leighton said.

Others worry that modern Israel's first political assassination will further polarize the nation.

"The innocence has been stripped. What was once impossible is now possible, and that boundary now having been crossed makes the next outrage an easier move to make," Leighton said.

-30-

Clinton's pastor chosen to lead Arkansas Baptists

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- President Clinton's pastor, Rex Horne, will have the added distinction of leading Arkansas Baptists next year.

Horne, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, was elected president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention Nov. 1.

Moderates in Arkansas backed Horne, who won the election 482-398 over conservative candidate Stephen Davis. Davis, pastor of First Baptist Church in Russellville, is a trustee of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

Horne succeeds a conservative, Ronnie Rogers, pastor of Lakeside Baptist Church in Hot Springs. Rogers was unable to preside at the convention at First Baptist Church in Little Rock because of health problems. Rogers underwent successful quadruple bypass surgery four days prior to the annual meeting and remained hospitalized throughout the convention.

In the past Horne has been criticized by fellow Baptists over Clinton's pro-choice abortion position and his advocacy of gay rights, though Horne insists he disagrees with the president on those issues.

At the 1993 Southern Baptist Convention, a Florida pastor unsuccessfully challenged the seating of messengers from Horne's church, charging the members of Immanuel were "by their silence, supporting Bill Clinton's endorsement of the homosexual lifestyle." The SBC Credentials Committee rejected the challenge.

The church has led Arkansas Baptists in giving through the SBC's Cooperative Program for more than 30 years and last year ranked 13th nationwide in giving through the unified budget.

While electing Horne, messengers also adopted resolutions opposing homosexuality and affirming the sanctity of human life.

Also at the Oct. 31-Nov. 1 meeting, Arkansas Baptists honored Don Moore, who is retiring in February after 13 years as the state convention's executive director.

-30-

-- By ABP staff. Based on reporting by Trennis Henderson.

Mississippi Baptists approve change in home missions funding

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) -- Mississippi Baptists voted without debate to change the way they fund home missions in the state at their Oct. 31-Nov. 1 convention meeting at First Baptist Church in Jackson.

Messengers approved a budget that continues to give the Southern Baptist Convention 37 percent of funds collected from Mississippi churches through the Cooperative Program unified budget. The state will deduct nearly \$250,000 from the SBC share, however, to fund home missions work in Mississippi.

That is about how much of the \$8.6 million Mississippi Baptists send to national agencies that would normally come back from the SBC Home Mission Board for jointly funded projects in Mississippi. The convention will continue to fund HMB work in other states but will assume total responsibility for missions in Mississippi.

Despite the change, the Atlanta-based HMB will receive the same amount from Mississippi in 1996 as in 1995 because of surplus funds in the state's budget this year.

At least two other large state conventions are considering altering their SBC funding this fall.

Texas Baptists are scheduled to vote Nov. 13-14 to consider cutting their SBC funding by about \$1.5 million next year to fund a project to start 1,400 new churches in the state over the next five years.

Oklahoma Baptists, meeting Nov. 13-15, will consider keeping a higher percentage of Cooperative Program funds, citing a string of deficit state convention budgets.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

House offers D.C. students money for religious schools

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. House of Representatives approved, 241 to 177, a program that would provide scholarships for low-income children to attend public or private schools in the District of Columbia area.

The scholarship program was part of an overall school-reform package that was added to the D.C. budget bill (H.R. 2546). Scholarships of up to \$3,000 would be doled out by an independent board to students attending public, private or religious schools.

The Senate previously approved a spending bill for the district without the scholarship provision, and a conference committee must work out the differences in the two versions.

Supporters of the measure say because public schools have failed children, low-income families should have the opportunity to send their children to the school of their choice. Opponents say that such provisions are unconstitutional and the scholarships are no different from vouchers.

Rep. Steven Gunderson, R-Wis., said that his proposal does not take money from public schools and give it to private institutions.

"A voucher by any other name is still a voucher," countered Rep. William Clay, D-Mo., who added that the Gunderson amendment would not bring school reform and may be unconstitutional.

Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, called the program "misguided."

"You don't improve the public schools by taking resources away and paying students to go to a religious school," Walker said. "Plus it's clearly unconstitutional. Calling it a 'scholarship' rather than a 'voucher' or 'grant' doesn't cure the constitutional problem."

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, noted that nearly half of the \$100 million set aside for school reform would finance the voucher program.

"The Constitution flatly bars Congress from taxing Americans to support religious instruction," Lynn said. "If this program becomes law, a legal challenge is certain" because government must not be allowed to "pass the collection plate to taxpayers."

-30-

-- By Pam Parry

END