



# Life after the presidency: Israel's 10th head of state, Reuven Rivlin, stays busy

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

As speaker of the Knesset before his election to the presidency in 2014, Reuven Rivlin used to weep on Israel's Independence Day each year when hoisting the national flag on Jerusalem's Mount Herzl, he recalled in an exclusive interview with *The Jerusalem Post* for Independence Day. His grandchildren asked him, "Saba, why are you crying?" and he replied, "I'm not crying tears of sadness. I'm crying tears of joy because I still remember the first time the flag of Israel flew in Jerusalem."

Only four native sons can be counted among the 11 presidents of Israel. Of the four, only the present incumbent, Isaac Herzog, was born after the establishment of the state, and two of the other three – Yitzhak Navon and Rivlin – can claim descent from multi-generational Jerusalem families.

Ezer Weizman, Israel's seventh president, was the nephew of Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first president; but Chaim Weizmann and his many siblings were born in what is now Belarus, which was then part of the Russian Empire.

Rivlin, 83, is a seventh-generation Jerusalemite whose grandchildren are ninth generation. The Rivlins were among 250 families who came from Lithuania in 1809, allegedly at the behest of the Vilna Gaon, who told his disciples that it made no sense for them to pray three times a day for the Almighty to return them to Jerusalem when they could simply board a ship and go there.

That was a logical argument. But what really persuaded them according to Rivlin family legend, was the Hebrew calendar year Taf Kuf Ayin, which the Vilna Gaon said was the year of the arrival of the Messiah because the three letters suggested the blowing of the ram's horn to hail his coming.

Rivlin used to joke that when the family arrived in the Land of Israel, they used to go to bed with their shoes on, so that if the Messiah came, they could run to greet him.

The Rivlins were divided into two opposing clans – the Mitnagdim, who in English are known as the Lithuanians; and the Hassidim. Reuven Rivlin says he is actually descended from both. His father, the famous Oriental scholar Yosef Yoel Rivlin, was a Mitnaged; and his mother,



REUVEN RIVLIN (Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

Rachel (Ray), grew up as a Chabadnik. She was a member of the Jerusalem City Council and also active in Bnei Brith. Some of the members of the two sides were very hostile to each other. The Mitnagdim, for instance, would not allow the Hassidim to live in Jerusalem; they

banished them to Hebron, where they remained until the Arab riots of 1929.

Rivlin's parents, who were cousins, were the first to break the taboo against marriage between Mitnagdim and Hassidim. The Rivlin name can be found in many spheres of achievement in Israel

and abroad. All together, says Rivlin, there are more than 50,000 people whose mother or father was born a Rivlin.

Raised in a traditional Jewish home in Jerusalem's Rehavia neighborhood, Rivlin describes himself as secular Orthodox. What that means is that he can recite all the prayers by heart and has no trouble if asked to read the Torah at synagogue services. He observes Passover and Yom Kippur, and before he became a vegetarian, would never eat pork or seafood. Until he began his military service, he regularly donned tefillin, but then he lapsed. He credits his parents with being very liberal and not lecturing him when he went to watch soccer matches on Saturday afternoons.

For all that, it was not until he became president that Rivlin developed an understanding of the significance of the Conservative and Reform movements, which he had previously viewed with disfavor. It had bothered him a lot and still does that there is so much intermarriage and that the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers consider themselves to be Jewish, though according to Halacha they are not. But he acknowledges that they cannot be ignored because they are components of Diaspora Jewish communities, and he believes it is vitally important to "narrow the gap" between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. Rehavia, which is today an upmarket neighborhood, was in Rivlin's youth the neighborhood of choice of the wealthy Sephardi elite. The Ashkenazi families – mostly of German origin – lived in rented, key money apartments. The Rivlins, who lived in a five-room rented apartment, were considered aristocracy because they placed great value on education. When Yosef Yoel died, he left very little by way of money or material goods to his family. "What he left us was a wealth of education," Rivlin says.

Although the Rivlin story about being sent from Lithuania to Jerusalem by the Vilna Gaon is disputed by some historians, Rivlin makes light of it, conceding that members of the family are sometimes prone to exaggeration. But what is a fact, he says, is that the 250 families who came as mystic Zionists in 1809, almost a century before Herzl shared his vision of political Zionism, were led by the brother of the Vilna Gaon from whom Rivlin is a direct descendant.





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REUVEN RIVLIN with US President Joe Biden. (Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

As a youth, Rivlin had no ambition to be president of Israel. What he really wanted was to be mayor of Jerusalem, but out of respect for Teddy Kollek he decided not to throw his hat in the ring until Kollek was out of office. Ehud Olmert, who was more ambitious, did run against the aging Kollek – and triumphed.

Rivlin, who had been a member of the Jerusalem City Council, realized that he would never be mayor, and turned his attention to the Knesset. His immediate family and many of his cousins were disciples of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, and as such, aligned themselves with right-wing politics. That did not prevent them from forming close friendships with people on the Left or with Arabs.

Rivlin's father was almost a candidate for president, Rivlin recalls. He had been asked to represent Herut in the presidential elections, even though it was a foregone conclusion that Yitzhak Ben Zvi would win. In the final analysis, he withdrew his candidature.

His son grew up with a connection of some sort to all the presidents of Israel.

For instance, when Reuven Rivlin had his bar mitzvah, he read his Torah portion at the Yeshurun Synagogue, in

the presence of chief rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog, the grandfather of the current president. Afterwards he celebrated at the Hut, which was then the official residence of the second president. Because Ben Zvi and his wife were such good friends with Rivlin's parents, they invited the young Rivlin to have his bar mitzvah celebration in the Hut.

Years later, as a member of Knesset, he served with other legislators who became presidents – Ezer Weizman, Moshe Katsav, Shimon Peres and Isaac Herzog.

During his presidency, and before that as speaker of the Knesset, Rivlin was careful not to allow his personal political ideology to interfere with the fact that he was president of all the people. He was always acutely conscious that he was the speaker of the whole Knesset, not just the Likud faction, even though it was the Likud vote that secured his position.

But he opted to remain independent of Likud. In order to maintain his objectivity, he stopped attending the weekly Likud meetings.

Given the current political climate and his opposition to the manner in which judicial reform was thrust on the nation

– albeit not to judicial reform per se – Rivlin doubts that party members would support him as speaker today.

What he would dearly like to emerge from this crisis is a constitution that sets boundaries and clearly defines the separation of powers between the legislature, the government and the judiciary.

When Aharon Barak in 1992 accorded the Supreme Court unprecedented power of judicial activism, Rivlin frequently argued with him. With hindsight, while still disagreeing with the former chief justice, he sees it more as a philosophy of Barak's than an actual radical change.

Because Israel's demography is changing, with the high birth rates in the ultra-Orthodox and Arab populations, Rivlin believes a constitution is vital to ensuring Israel's democratic character.

Rivlin, who served as communications minister in the government of Ariel Sharon, never aspired to succeed him. He never wanted to be prime minister because he didn't want to be responsible for anyone's death, especially the deaths of children, women and innocent people in general.

During the Second Intifada, his son Yoli, who was serving in the IDF, told Rivlin that it would be appreciated if they could have some Air Force support. Rivlin relayed this to Sharon, and sure enough it was the first item on the agenda when Sharon convened an emergency meeting of the government the following day. Rivlin stood up and left the room. No one could understand why, but as someone who had a personal interest in the matter, he felt that he should not be part of the decision-making process on this particular issue. After he returned, Sharon asked him why he had absented himself. Rivlin explained that when he'd been an officer in the army, he had been ready to undertake any dangerous mission, but he could not bring himself to take on the responsibility for the loss of people's lives.

"So you'll never be prime minister," retorted Sharon, who then asked what Rivlin wanted to be – and the reply was that he wanted to be president.

It was Rivlin who accompanied Sharon on his controversial ascent to the Temple Mount. Asked whether he would do so again, Rivlin replied that he would not do it as a provocation "but as a Jew who is not an enemy of Islam."





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REUVEN RIVLIN with his successor, Isaac Herzog, at the President's Residence on July 7, 2021. (Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

Being president of Israel is largely a ceremonial apolitical position. Essentially, the president has two major duties – to sign every new law so that it can be implemented; and to pardon convicts who have applied on compassionate grounds or because they have shown genuine signs of remorse and rehabilitation.

Rivlin wondered during the interview whether his successor, President Isaac Herzog, would sign the new legislation and what would happen if he refused.

Although Rivlin may be lacking in the kind of leadership required to be a prime minister, he did not lack in leadership in matters of compassion. He paid condolence calls to the families of victims of terror and of fallen soldiers. That is generally expected of the president of the state, but Rivlin went a step further.

In October, 2014, he was the first president of Israel to participate in the memorial service for the Arab villagers of Kafr Kassem massacred by Israeli border policemen in 1956.

Declaring the massacre of 49 people who had not known about a curfew to be a terrible crime, Rivlin said that Israel's Arab population is not a marginal group but a fundamental part of Israeli society. "We are not doomed to live together," he said. "We are destined to live together, and we share the same fate."

This warm feeling for the Arab population derived from his upbringing.

Up until 1942, his family had been friendly with the Muslim Nusseiba family of Jerusalem and the Christian Frej family of Bethlehem.

On Saturdays, the Nusseiba and Frej families used to visit the Rivlins; on Fridays, Yosef Yoel Rivlin and his family visited the Nusseibas and other Arab families in Jerusalem. On Sundays, they went to Bethlehem to visit the Frej family – and they were all very good friends.

Both as president of Israel and speaker of the Knesset, Rivlin had a very good relationship with Arab legislators, mayors and academics. A lawyer by profession, Rivlin has a very healthy respect for the law and for democracy. After completing his term as president, he accepted the honorary chairmanship of the Israel Democracy Institute.

He insisted that there is no conflict between Israel being a Jewish and a democratic state. He also makes the point that the creation of the State of Israel is not by way of compensation for the Holocaust because the Zionist movement, with its ultimate goal of a homeland for the Jewish people, existed long before the Holocaust. It's a movement of repatriation, he said.

Rivlin's office is in the Malcha Technology Park in Jerusalem, where the embassies of Guatemala and Honduras are also located. Anyone who is not aware of where his office is will have trouble locating it because the names of the occupants of the building

no longer appear on a board on the wall but are in a computer, and Rivlin's name is missing. Likewise, there is no name plaque outside his office, apparently for reasons of security.

When Navon had an office on the same floor, there was a name plaque. Change is the name of the game, although according to Rivlin, "democracy is the name of the game."

In the waiting area inside the office, one wall is decorated with cartoon sketches of Rivlin, indicating his capacity for laughing at himself. In the inner office where he sits, framed photographs sit on a sideboard behind him, and a row of photographs on the wall depict prime ministers Yitzhak Shamir, Menachem Begin and David Ben-Gurion. But the dominant and much larger photo is that of Jabotinsky. The last photo on the wall is that of Jabotinsky and Ben-Gurion together, despite their political differences.

When he was properly settled in the President's Residence, Rivlin was visited by his immediate predecessor, Shimon Peres, who remarked on the fact that there was a portrait of Jabotinsky on the wall but none of Ben-Gurion. Rivlin responded that Ben-Gurion had always been on the walls of presidents and prime ministers, but Jabotinsky had not. "Let him be there by himself for six months, and then I promise to put up a portrait of Ben-Gurion as well," Rivlin told Peres.

Peres, who was a disciple of

Ben-Gurion, let the matter rest. But six months later, Rivlin kept his promise and invited Peres to come and see for himself.

Asked if he thought that the president should be given more authority than he has now, Rivlin did not answer directly but emphasized that the president is like the national flag – the symbol of unity.

In other words, whatever the president does or initiates must reflect an attempt to bring together the different sectors of society, whom Rivlin calls "the tribes." When he was president, he named four tribes, which live as separate entities: Israeli Arabs; Ultra-Orthodox Jews; National Religious Jews; and secular Jews. Now there's a fifth tribe – the Jewish Diaspora, which includes expatriate Israelis, he says, underscoring that the expats are essential in reducing the gap between Israel and the Diaspora, even though they no longer live in Israel.

Since completing his term in July 2021, Rivlin has been busy writing his memoir. The book of 20 chapters deals with his childhood, his education, his service in the IDF, his political career and, of course, the presidential pinnacle. It will be published by Yediot Aharonot Book Publisher and is scheduled for release just before Rosh Hashanah, which this year falls between the Gregorian and Hebrew calendar dates of Rivlin's 84th birthday.