

Excerpt from a speech delivered by Prof. Shlomo Ben Ami on the first anniversary of the death of Shevah Weiss, Warsaw 23 February 2024

Shevah Weiss was a Holocaust survivor that lived all his life with a deep sense of gratitude to the Polish family who had risked their lives while hiding him and his family from the Nazi death machine. In Israel he became a scholar and public servant with an extraordinary sense of responsibility and moral rectitude. As a politician he was an upright, honest partner to his colleagues and a mentor to newcomers like myself. When I became a Knesset member in 1996, Shevah was already a veteran parliamentarian who coached me in the intricacies of parliamentary rules, for he had been a towering speaker of parliament in one of the most turbulent years of our history, under Yitzhak Rabin's premiership. The Oslo accords split the nation and unleashed waves of violent protests against Rabin's peace enterprise. Shevah was a staunch supporter of Yitzhak Rabin's peace policies and he navigated in a masterful, and always noble and civilized way the business of a parliament split by profound disagreements over the most divisive issues imaginable.

Politicians normally have partners and enemies; Shevah had no enemies. He was a proficient parliamentarian with a keen knowledge of the legal intricacies of the system, and was also blessed with unique capabilities to settle disputes, reduce the volume of animosities and create a sense of parliamentary decency, even when the Knesset seemed to be sitting on a volcano about to erupt any moment. Shevah was a man of peace in turbulent times who gave Rabin the necessary parliamentary backbone for his peace policies. He was also the first to detect the "Peace and Nightmare", Shevah's book about his time as speaker is a masterpiece, a key to the understanding of those turbulent years at the end of which Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, and with him also the chances of peace.

Shevah was not a professional diplomat, but I was happy to be among those who encouraged Prime Minister Barak to appoint him as Israel's ambassador to Poland. I knew from my own experience as a non-professional ambassador in Spain that the key to success lay in knowledge of the history, language and manners of the country one is sent to. And most importantly, Shevah knew that he had a double mission – one was the natural one, representing Israel's case in Poland, while the other was to have the courage and decency to convey Poland's dilemma in Israel. No country in Europe was more central to Jewish life than Poland. Shevah knew that the history of nations has always had in it a sense of tragedy that only the great, generous mind and big heart with which he was blessed could distinguish between the good and noble core and the peripheral wrongs.