

## **Miriam Ben-Peretz: Window on a Scholar's Soul**

Forward

[by]

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[for]

Miriam Ben-Peretz. Autobiography

To know Miriam Ben-Peretz is to have a window on Jewish state history and Middle East affairs; to have a friendship with Miriam Ben-Peretz is to have a window into the soul of a good human being. And beyond, or perhaps infusing, these windows is the power of ideas, appearing and reappearing in particular people over time, to create threads of recognition and meaning. I want to say several words about each of these points. I first met Miriam in the fall of 1973 when she spent an unexpected period of time visiting me in Toronto because regular air flights to Israel were cancelled during the surprise Yom Kippur war. Thus began my window view as the name opened discussions on Jewish religious life and the status of the Israeli state narrative, while cementing a personal and professional friendship.

But why was Miriam coming to Toronto in the first place? She was a student at Hebrew University undertaking a UNESCO tour of British, American and Canadian curriculum centres arranged by her doctoral dissertation chair and Dean of Education at Hebrew University, Seymour Fox. On my first visit to the graduate dean's office when I began my doctoral studies at the University of Chicago Seymour Fox's PhD dissertation on Freud was piled high on the reception desk. The dissertation was chaired by Joseph Schwab, the leading theorist on

knowledge and the curriculum and the reason I was in Chicago instead of in Edmonton at the University of Alberta where I had begun my doctoral studies a year earlier. Schwab was a dominant intellect, a brilliant teacher who touched students in ways they never forgot. He won Chicago's teaching award on more than one occasion. Both Seymour and I, neither of whom had even heard of the other, Israeli urban Jew and Western Canadian rural Roman Catholic, were linked in ways neither of us expected.

The link was more than happenstance and the cementing force of Joe Schwab's powerful personality. It was, over time, the communal ties of forceful ideas seeping into varied outlets and carrying with them the energy of creativity that created the thread. Seymour Fox studied Freud, psychology and education and I studied ecosystem ecology, philosophy and science education. Schwab guided these diverse pursuits with ideas traced back to the Greeks through John Dewey, Plato, Aristotle and others. When Miriam and I met we were two people interested in curriculum. But we came together because of Joe Schwab's teaching and influence and because, through Seymour Fox, the ideas driving Schwab's teaching created the potential. These are the threads of meaning and recognition that bonded Miriam and I in a subsequent professional and personal shared journey.

The energy and ideas sparked by intellectual forces that lead back to Aristotle and Plato and which brought Miriam to Toronto show up in Miriam's remarkable academic and public intellectual career. It was not by accident but, rather, by the narrative power of ideas that she was chosen by Seymour Fox to study abroad. She studied and was a lecturer and visiting professor in important academic centers in Europe and North America. Leading institutions in Israel, France,

Germany, England, United States of America, Australia, and Canada loom large on her curriculum vita. She collaborated with scholars from around the world on curriculum studies, teacher education, educational policy, and Jewish Education. Her journal articles and book writing are prolific and influential. I know of no one who has been as widely recognized for her accomplishments internationally and on her home soil. She was awarded the 1977 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Lifetime Achievement Award in Curriculum Studies, and she repeated the honor by winning AERA's 2012 Teacher Education Legacy Award. By themselves these are extraordinary accomplishments especially for an organization as "American" as AERA. But these accomplishments were exceeded by AERA's top award when, in 2014, she was elected as an American Educational Research Association Fellow.

I recall reading a study on the social habits of academics in which it was said that scholars were divided into Localists focused on local, provincial and national matters and Universalists focused on crosscutting/cross-cultural inquiries. Based on her international inquiries, collaborative writing, and awards and honors Miriam might be classed as an Universalist. But this would shadow a remarkable local career as she studied and administered in Israeli settings and received Israel's highest awards for scholarship. Miriam has been awarded Israel's top academic prizes. Not only was she a department head and Dean of Education at Haifa University she founded the Center for Jewish Education in Israel and the Diaspora at the University of Haifa. Beyond this she reached further into higher education as President of Tel-Hai College, where she continues as a member of the board of governors, and she reached out to her local community where she was a member of the City Council of Haifa for 10 years during which time she served as an advisor to the mayor, and played important committee roles with respect to women, soldiers' Memorial,

and education. The City of Haifa named a street in her honor. With her husband Moshe Ben-Peretz, Miriam reached out in support of the Israeli arts community.

These community and public intellectual roles and activities might seem enough to fulfil a rich “localist” life and autobiography. But Miriam was also a first rate Israeli focused researcher. Her achievements and awards outside of Israel would fulfil the hopes and dreams of the most ambitious scholars worldwide. But these international accolades pale in comparison to her Israeli accomplishments and awards. Her first Israeli based award came in 1971, six years before receiving her doctorate, the Amos De Shalit Science Teaching Award given by the Weizman Institute of Science. Later she won the prestigious 2006 Israel Prize for Research in Education awarded by the State of Israel for cultural contributions to Israeli life. While devoted to research she was equally committed to the universities she served and was honored by those with which she was most closely associated. She was given the 2002 University of Haifa Award of Merit; she was recognized in 2007 as a Dignitary of Tel-Hai College; and she was named an Honorary Fellow by the Israel Open University. Her most stunning scholarly award is the 2012 Prime Minister of Israel’s EMET Prize for Art, Science and Culture. There are five Award Categories: Exact Sciences, Life Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, Culture and Arts. Miriam won in the Social Sciences category, something that those of us who work in educational studies can barely imagine given the status of various social science fields.

These extraordinary accomplishments and the recognition she has achieved internationally and at home in Israel express Seymour Fox’s insights into Miriam’s capabilities and how she is a marvelous modern day vessel for Schwab’s ideas and the idea stream that influenced him.

Miriam has made an intellectual difference and she has influenced the practical world. She is living evidence of the long term narrative power of ideas.

I began this Forward by remarking that to know Miriam is to have a window on Jewish state history and Israeli affairs. This is doubly true since to know Miriam was also to know her husband Moshe Ben-Peretz. It was through his leadership in an arts community that my wife and I purchased a painting of an Israeli Synagogue and its surroundings colored, we were told, in the subtle landscape tones visible on the route between Eilat, the Dead Sea, and Jerusalem, a site we discovered with pleasure years later during a visit with the Ben-Peretz's during Sukkot. While they celebrated in Haifa we visited Eilat and travelled north by bus in wonderfully favorable lighting conditions where the colors on the hills to our East displayed the tones of our painting. Among other things Moshe was a knowledgeable amateur archaeologist and the Ben-Peretz home was filled with artifacts relevant to Israeli history and presented to visitors in a web of ancient stories informative on Jewish life and Western history generally. My wife and I display a small Roman oil urn given to us by Moshe who uncovered it along the shores of the Mediterranean close to Haifa.

My place in Miriam's autobiography began with an important historical moment during the Yom Kippur war. These historical threads continue. When Miriam asked me to write a Forward for her autobiography she wrote:

*The Jewish New Year starts again. I'm going to celebrate it with my daughters, but we'll miss Moshe very much. Tomorrow is Yom-Kippur evening, the one day a year that the country (its Jewish parts) stops everything in order to contemplate what went right and wrong and how to*

*correct mistakes. New beginnings always hold hope for improvement, personally I hope for continuation of my work, on one hand, and for much joy with my family, on the other hand.*

My first meeting with Miriam opened the window on the Jewish state and its history and now, close to half a century later, the window continues to reveal and educate. I learned that Miriam is intimately, and personally, linked to the formation of the Jewish state. Her first husband was a freedom fighter killed in the Israeli War of Independence. Moshe, her second husband, a lawyer by profession, was also involved in the War and Independence movement. Following the war he played a role in Israel and Paris based offices formalizing State of Israel conditions. The historical events leading up to and surrounding the formation of the Jewish state are so different than those at work in my home country of Canada that reading about the history of Israel can feel a little like studying ancient Mesopotamia in grade school - possibly interesting, knowledge worth gaining, but distant and mostly unfelt. My Miriam Ben-Peretz window on Judaism and the formation of the Jewish state brings history to life in a way that no amount of textbook reading could. I find myself following the Middle Eastern news carefully and critically and even judgmentally. I worry about the character and actions of Jewish leaders and political parties and of international agencies and governments and their assessments of actions by, and about, Israel.

I trust that readers of this book will, as I have, open windows of insight and understanding into what it means to be a good human being, a Jew, a member of the Jewish state and a restless intellectual spirit expressing theoretical and practical/political influence as an extension of the narrative of powerful ideas. Above all I wish that Miriam's window on leading a life of optimism will open up for readers. I sometimes feel a sense of despair as I read and listen to the news

affecting Israel as I wonder how my dear friend can maintain a healthy positive outlook. Here in Canada I cannot imagine bomb and gas shelters and fences separating people and yet I have seen both in Israel. Still, Miriam writes to say she will celebrate the New Year with her family and she is filled with hope and plans for work. This book and its story is one to read at night and to carry close during seemingly endless tense times.