



## Interest in Past Leaders Reflects the Crisis on the Israeli Left

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

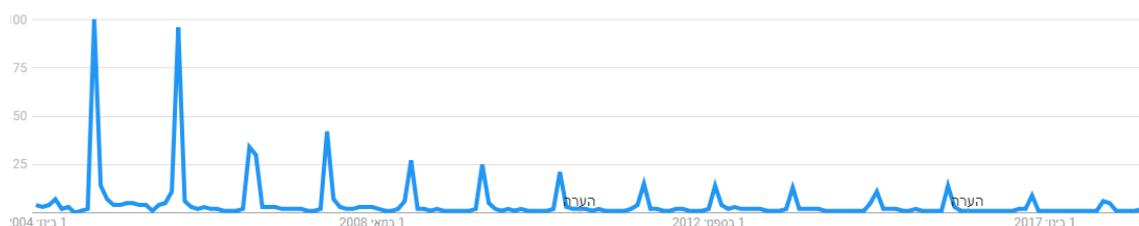
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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The crisis of the Israeli left is reflected in the sharply declining interest within Israel in Yitzhak Rabin compared to Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir. The opposite trend is visible abroad. The problem of the left is that it is Israelis who vote, not the world community.

A search for the term “Yitzhak Rabin” in Hebrew in Google Trends reveals a sharp decline in interest since 2005, the tenth anniversary of Rabin’s assassination. The decline is precipitous in the years immediately following 2005 and then levels off. Still, the decline over time is substantial. If searches for Rabin in 2004 represent 100, the high point, this figure was down to 6 by October 2017 – less than one-twelfth the number of searches 13 years before.

Interest in Rabin is also sharply correlated to the period of commemoration that occurs in November of each year on the anniversary of the assassination. Obviously, official remembrance days heighten awareness in any particular year, but they have done little to arrest the overall decline in interest in Rabin.

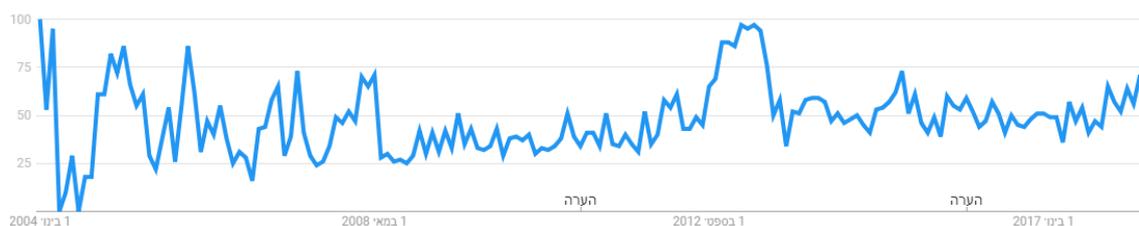
### “Yitzhak Rabin” in Google Trends



The same exercise regarding Menachem Begin and Shamir shows a stark contrast. Whereas interest in Rabin has declined sharply, interest in Begin and Shamir remains surprisingly constant – not only over the years, but within the calendar year.

These comparisons say nothing about the absolute number of searches over time among the three leaders. They do say something conclusive, however, about trends in interest and therefore in the collective historical memory.

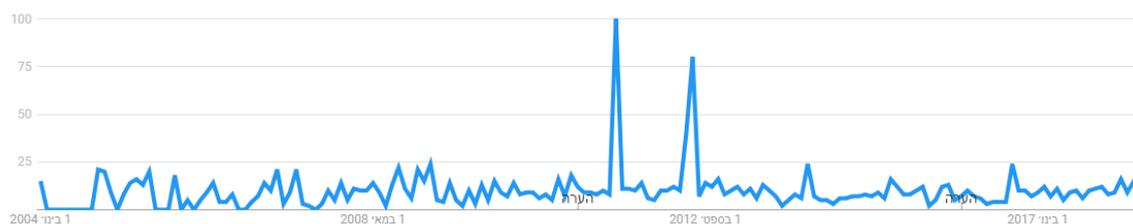
### “Menachem Begin” in Google Trends



How much these leaders are remembered can be gauged by the absolute number of searches for them, which I checked as of June 1, 2018. Begin, despite his having been older and whose death preceded that of Rabin, is nevertheless searched for far more in Hebrew: about 3,410,000 results compared to 2,510,000 for Rabin.

Similarly, interest in Yitzhak Shamir has stayed at an even keel over time. Of course, the differences between the peaks and the steady periods is greater in Shamir’s case than in Begin’s because Shamir’s illness and subsequent death were tracked by Google Trends. Begin’s illness and death occurred well before the internet became popular.

### “Yitzhak Shamir” in Google Trends

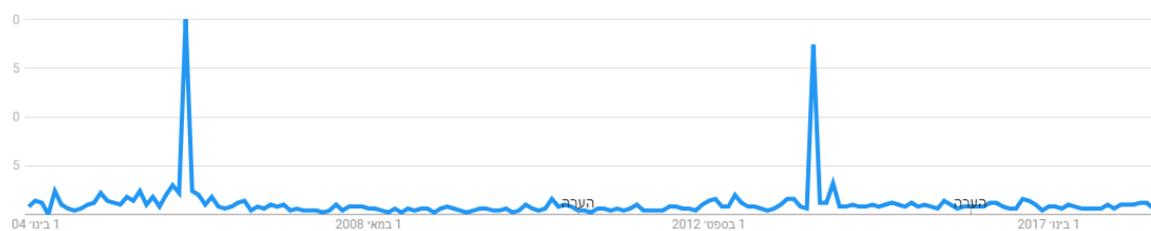


That Begin and Shamir continue to generate interest in contrast to Rabin is probably a reflection of Israel’s changing political, cultural, and demographic profile. There is an ongoing decline in enrollment in secular government schools, an increase in enrollment in religious schools, and a greater percentage of students of Sephardic origin.

It is also apparent that patterns of interest and memory correspond with and feed into general political trends – the growing dominance of the right and the decline of the left, especially the Labor Party, which was once led by Rabin.

Interest in Ariel Sharon over time places him somewhere between the growing disinterest in Rabin and the continued vibrant interest in Begin and Shamir. Interest in Sharon, as with other leaders, was at a high pitch when he suffered a stroke in office and peaked at his death. However, he continues to arouse interest. Since his death, he has continued to be searched at roughly half the rate at which he was searched while prime minister. (Of course, he was prime minister more than a decade after Rabin, so time will tell.)

### **“Ariel Sharon” in Google Trends**

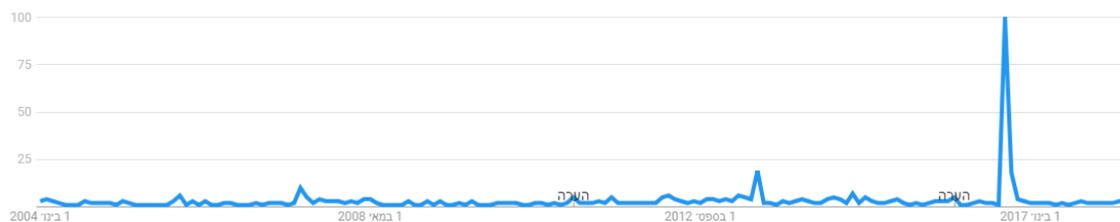


One personality with whom it is difficult to compare is Shimon Peres, because little time has gone by since his decease. Interest in leaders always peaks at their death rather than during their lifetimes. The pattern of interest in Peres does appear “flatter” than that of the other leaders, probably because he never held significant positions of power following the inception of Google Trends. (The presidency is a largely ceremonial office in Israel.)

This is reflected in the far lower total number of Google searches for Peres – 1,980,000 compared to 3.4 million for Begin and 2.5 million for Rabin. Still, for a person who was never elected to the highest office, this is no mean achievement.

The importance of serving as prime minister is reflected in the number of searches for Sharon in Hebrew: 2,720,000, far higher than Peres achieved either before or after his death. Searches for the incumbent prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu (the longest-serving prime minister, at least since the founding of the internet) amount, at over 15 million, to considerably more than those for the two leaders on the left, Rabin and Peres, put together.

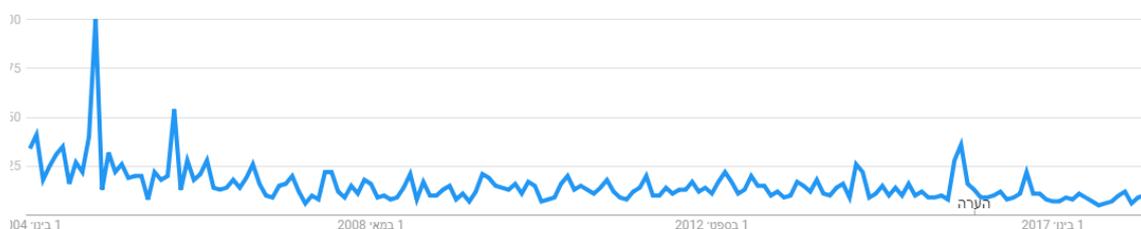
## “Shimon Peres” in Google Trends



One mustn't forget that Sharon and Peres are overcounted relative to Rabin and Begin because they passed away long after the internet established itself as the leading disseminator of political news.

An attempt to see if the same contrast in interest in Rabin and his political opponents, Begin and Shamir, extends to historical and ideological personalities who personified the two movements they represented – Berl Katznelson on the left and Ze'ev Jabotinski on the right – ended in failure. Google Trends reported insufficient findings for both, meaning interest in these figures (both of whom passed away more than eighty years ago) is limited to very small intellectual and academic circles.

## Searches for “Yitzhak Rabin” in English in the world since 2004



Where Rabin continues to evoke interest over time is outside Israel and among Israelis who search in English. Remarkably, one-third more searches were made on Rabin in Kenya (at 21%) than in the whole of the US, with its sizeable Jewish population. There were more searches on Rabin in Costa Rica, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Canada than in the US as well. Google Trends reported on searches for Rabin in 38 countries, the threshold of inclusion being that the searches must amount to 1% of searches that took place in the leading country (Israel).

Though Begin continues to arouse interest abroad, that interest is far more geographically limited. Google Trends reported on searches for Begin in only 21 countries. The gap between interest in Begin in Israel and in the rest of the

world is far greater. Searches in the US, second after Israel, amounted to only 9% compared to 21% in the case of Rabin.

The findings relating to interest in Rabin, Begin, and Shamir should come as no surprise. While Israel is turning increasingly to the right, the international community continues to identify with Israel's peace camp, which is personified – rightly or wrongly – by Yitzhak Rabin.

The pattern of interest in past leaders is bad news for the Israeli left as it is Israelis, not their critics abroad, who vote their leaders into office.

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