

Photo courtesy of Arlene Peck

Politically incorrect...
and loving it

by Miriam Perl

Although I've never met Arlene Peck personally, her vibrancy, her ebullience, her abrasive wit, her boldly forthright intelligence and her sexiness register loud and clear. She describes herself as someone who is friendly, curious, easygoing, happy, outgoing, vain and sometimes far too energetic. She also admits to having to temper her ego from getting the best of her. It is all of these qualities that infuse the life energy of her many and diverse projects that include host of a television show, columnist in several Jewish newspapers, a one-time Middle East radio reporter during the 1982 war in Lebanon, commentator and lecturer on topics such as "older women and younger men," author of books, actress and founder of Technion in Atlanta.

If all that were not enough, Peck broke the gender barrier in Atlanta by becoming the first female vice president of a synagogue, and for six years was the only woman to act as a chairperson of Jewish discussion groups conducted inside Atlanta's federal penitentiaries. Peck later traveled with Rabbi Meir Kahane to start Jewish discussion groups in the prisons in upstate New York. Eventually, she was barred from the prisons because she had the audacity to bring in kosher food and conducted a Passover *seder* against regulations.

A window into Peck's penchant for disruption, for her disregard of other's censure and approbation, while expressing herself in her vehemently unpopular style, can be gleaned from her forays into the prison system. Peck wrote about her experiences in her book, *Some of My Best Friends: Only the Names Have Been Changed to Protect the Guilty*.

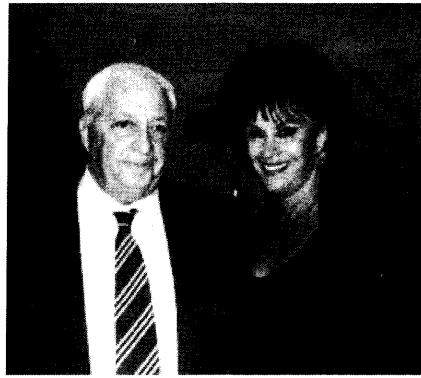
As a columnist for several Jewish newspapers, she is famous for her controversial opining in which she seeks to portray in a clear, brutal light the particularly thorny and difficult issues surrounding the Arab-Israeli conflict. She reports in a way that seeks to set the record straight, to hold to the high road of brutal honesty, no matter how difficult her commentary may be for some readers to swallow, no matter who is offended by its unapologetic, politically incorrect approach.

Peck uses words that hit the heart of an issue square on with abrasive, direct and no-holds-barred language. She knows who she is and of what she speaks, and refuses to kowtow to the left-leaning camps that, in her view, are driven ultimately by what she deems as self-hating Jews and by their literally blinding compassion, that in the name of a higher morality become oblivious to how values such as peace and compassion should be tempered or expressed in the cold light of geopolitics.

In sum, her articles express a prevailing sense of outrage over the double standard that is always demanded of Israel. She expresses her strident dismay over the United Nations, which she says "is one of the biggest dangers today, as it is a hotbed of Arab sentiment and European antisemitism. The rapid rise of Islamic fundamentalism is the biggest danger to the entire world right now. Unfortunately, Israel is in the middle of this hotbed of festering hatred." Her solution is to transfer the Palestinian people to their rightful homeland in Jordan. "Israel is a Jewish country. The only Jewish country surrounded by 22 hostile Arab nations... With the rapid rise of European antisemitism that is

sweeping the world, we must never forget how important a refuge Israel is for all of us."

Peck continues in her trademark style, punctuating her writing with unflattering epithets for those with



Peck with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

whom she is clearly exasperated. In connection to those that are promoting the roadmap to peace, Peck writes, "As naïve as the Americans and most of the others who are promoting...this roadmap are, the Jews who allow such thinking are beyond just stupid. It is simply unforgivable! Why is Israel being forced to join in this appeasement policy? We, as a nation, would never negotiate with terrorists. Yet, while our government



Peck with Elie Wiesel.

and every other country is preoccupied with the roadmap, these Islamic fundamentalists and close brothers, the Palestinians, go along their merry way, bombing and terrorizing everything in sight! When there is a cancer in a body, it has to be removed. Not negotiated

with, nor appeased. It has to be cut out. The same must be done with the enemy. I'm sick and tired of the political correctness of it all. We know who our enemies are and have the means to destroy them. So does Israel. Let them do what's necessary!"

Peck is clearly aware of how others see her and is quick to defend against the barbs that are thrown her way. "My leftist friends—the few I have left—consider me a 'radical.' I consider my way of thinking logical. If the roadmap to the sea is going to build a terrorist state around and within the Jewish state in its biblical heartland, it's a danger, it's a danger, and it's a danger. I even believe a roach is a roach is a roach. So if describing as vermin those who strive for the demise of the Jews and who rush to bomb yeshiva boys and teenagers out for a pizza makes me a radical, so be it!...The bottom line is that we all better get involved. Because if Israel falls, so do the Jewish people. All those wonderful, caring Europeans and self-hating leftists will maybe just shed a crocodile tear or two and go merrily on their way."

It should come as no surprise, given the current climate of political correctness, that Peck was unceremoniously dropped as a featured columnist from one Jewish newspaper because of what they deemed her controversial, stridently anti-Arab stance. Peck vehemently and righteously wrote a scathing article on how Jewish editors who make decisions based on fear of a backlash, rather than the truth, seek to shut out her voice, a voice which represents the voice of many Jews in greater and greater numbers than ever before. As a result of her firing, many readers wrote letters in protest to the newspaper, and two other newspapers quickly picked her up.

It's not the first time that Peck has ruffled an important feather, which has led to her finding herself out of the coterie of invited and welcomed reporters. In an article in which she laments the poor state of Israel's public

Photo courtesy of Arlene Peck

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relations, she wrote that Yuval Rotan, the Los Angeles Consul General, extended little cooperation with the press. She suddenly found herself “not on the list” anymore. While she is still invited to events sponsored by the governments of Italy and Germany, she says that the Israeli Consulate and the French never invite her to anything the press should be covering.

As a television host, Peck is currently beamed into the homes of Californians from the set of her television show aptly named *Wow, It's Arlene Peck*. With her inimitable style, she seeks to highlight the lives of celebrities such as Ed Asner (although she never, but never agrees with any of his politics; when not talking about politics she finds him a ‘darling man’), and Casey Kasem (the “ultimate gentleman”); politicians such as Shimon Peres, Jimmy Carter, Bibi Netanyahu and Yitzchak Shamir, the latter two listed among Peck’s all-time favorite guests. In connection with Bibi Netanyahu, who she interviewed some 25 years ago, she presciently wrote an article at the time called “The Man Who Will Be Prime Minister One Day.”

Other noteworthy guests have been Ted Turner, Jack Englehard, Gloria Allred, the late Dr. Edward Teller, Dr. Daniel Pipes (“who is one of the most brilliant men I know”), the late Rabbi Meir Kahane and Elie Wiesel, who has “the most soulful eyes I’ve ever seen.”

Peck relates a humorous story about how she clumsily first encountered Wiesel, and of her impressions of him. “Elie Wiesel I found to be a very sexy man. It’s the eyes and the power that is behind them. We met on an elevator at the Tel Aviv Hilton. It was just the two of us. I knew he looked familiar. Finally I said, ‘I know who you are!’ He smiled and said, ‘You do?’ ‘Yes, you’re Simon Wiesenthal!’ He answered, ‘Close, I’m Elie Wiesel.’ To which I replied, ‘I knew it was a ‘W’ word.’” Since then, Peck and Wiesel have become friends, so much so that Weisel plans to write the foreword of Peck’s upcoming book, entitled *Secrets*, a book

about the marvelous and not-so-marvelous people she’s interviewed.

Although Peck resonates most famously as an effervescent personality, there is



Peck with former Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

also a quiet, pensive side to this woman. Someone who delves into the souls of the likes of Yitzchak Shamir and Elie Wiesel, sees ferocity in the former and a quiet intelligence in the latter, must have a contemplative soul that ruminates on the nature of life and death. No doubt this ability to assess what is ultimately of importance in life grew out of her experience of being diagnosed with two brain tumors and with breast cancer on the same day.



Peck in Gaza with IDF forces.

“It made me look at my life and whatever was going to continue in it as something to cherish and make myself a useful person at the end of every day. And I remember with the fondest of memories how my daughter, Dana, and I tackled the 60-mile 3-day Breast Cancer Walk with

5000 other women and a lot of daughters. It was one of the most bonding and beautiful memories that I have had.”

Another cherished memory is her moment with God in front of the Western Wall in *Eretz Israel*. “I remember when I was in Israel right before the Gulf War and told to travel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem for some event, which was to be held in front of the Western Wall. It was late at night and [the area was] closed off for the event. At this point none of the dignitaries had arrived, nor was there very much press. I was one of the first to arrive. I looked up, and although I have traveled to Jerusalem many times, I had never seen it like that. It seemed as though it was just me and *Hashem* for a few quiet moments—the lights, the soft breeze, most of all the feeling that it was pulsating. Honestly, I felt in those few minutes a closeness and connection that I hope never leaves me.”

The essence of Arlene Peck is aptly summed up by a reader in a letter as he reflected on his own life in the aftermath of surgery. He tells a story that one day as he was sitting on a park bench alongside the Elizabeth River, a small flotilla of ducks paddled into view, swimming across the water in chorus-line unison. When one duck turned, they all turned. As he watched them zigzag along predictably, he noticed one single duck swimming with the others, but clearly cutting her own path through the water. She sometimes turned left when they turned right, took little adventures on her own, and quacked when the others were quiet.

For this reader, the antics of this duck was a metaphor for the many courageous women of the Bible. He continues to praise the valiant efforts of many women of today, among whom he mentions Arlene Peck, with whom he adds that while “he at times may disagree, she is always ready to express her heartfelt beliefs.”

Indeed, Arlene Peck is a formidable spirit who strives to speak the truth as she sees it, a truth driven by the impulse for her love of Israel and the Jewish people, even if that means facing the wrath and disapproval of others.

lifestyles