

The Begin Phenomenon

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Three biographical accounts of the former Israeli prime minister raise questions about whether his foreign policy approach is truly applicable to the Iran nuclear talks and other current issues.

"A giant clock hangs above our head, and it is ticking." The words were reportedly Menachem Begin's, at a meeting before the 1981 strike on the Osirak nuclear reactor near Baghdad. He was referring to *The Clock Overhead*, a novel by the Holocaust survivor known as Ka-Tzetnik.

This scene, reproduced in Daniel Gordis's biography *Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel's Soul*, offers an apt lead-in to the persona and politics of Israel's first Likud prime minister. It has the reference to the Holocaust and the Jewish legacy in Eastern Europe, often muted by leaders in the Labor Zionist movement. It has the air of melodrama and urgency. And it has the implicit call for Jewish defense.

The Osirak mission's result was a second major success for Begin's administration, the first being the peace agreement with Egypt. None of the feared consequences, notably retaliation from Iraq or a serious rebuke from US President Ronald Reagan, materialized. The destruction of the reactor also inaugurated what became known as the Begin Doctrine, according to which Israel would not allow any Arab state to acquire a nuclear weapon.

In recent years, the Iran nuclear crisis has returned the Begin Doctrine to relevance, providing a backdrop for Gordis's volume, part of Schocken's Jewish Encounters series. The author, senior vice-president at Jerusalem's Shalem College and winner of the 2009 National Jewish Book Award for *Saving Israel*, does not hide his aim of championing Begin and the Jewish values he embodied.

"I hope that this book," he writes, "will lead us all to examine once again what it was about Menachem Begin's view of the world that led him to defend his people with such devotion, and what it is about rediscovering his legacy that might prompt us to do the same." Central to this discussion is the concept of *hadar*, or dignity, which appears in "Shir Betar," the anthem of Betar, the Revisionist Zionist youth movement. The second verse begins, "Dignity [*hadar*] / A

Jew, even in poverty, is a prince."

Begin's father, Ze'ev Dov, a timber merchant who held prominent roles in the Jewish community of Brisk, Poland (today Brest, Belarus), lived out his belief in the nobility of every Jew, sometimes violently. In one incident, he clubbed a Polish officer who tried to cut off a rabbi's beard. In another, together with Mordechai Scheinermann, the grandfather of future prime minister Ariel Sharon, he "broke down the door of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik's synagogue to conduct a memorial service for the recently deceased Theodor Herzl, despite Reb Chaim's explicit insistence that no service be held." Menachem, the youngest of three siblings, revered his father for such bold acts.

Revisionism, founded by Zeev Jabotinsky in opposition to the dominant, socialism-based Labor Zionism, was the ideological home for the Begin family. While still in high school, Begin described himself as being "lifted up, borne aloft, up, up" while attending a talk by Jabotinsky at the Brisk theater. Despite being "beardless, slight, and walking with a slouch," Begin steadily ascended the ranks of the Betar youth group, honing his oratorical skills and wearing his Betar uniform almost everywhere he went.

A decade later, he would be named Betar commander for Poland. And soon after his 1941 release from a Soviet prison, to which he had been sentenced for "anti-Soviet and anti- Communist" activities associated with his Betar work, Begin moved to Palestine. This marked the start of his bitter, long-running rivalry with Labor patriarch David Ben-Gurion, who headed the movement that was instrumental in establishing the State of Israel.

One compelling thesis presented by Gordis is that Ben-Gurion and the Hagana, the prestate Yishuv's major Jewish defense organization, routinely exploited Etzel (the abbreviation of Irgun Zvai Leumi, National Military Organization), the paramilitary group led by Begin, when it suited the former's propaganda needs. This was at least partly the case in the April 9, 1948 massacre carried out by the Etzel in the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin, adjacent to Jerusalem. When damaging press reports emerged about the attack, Hagana area commander David Shaltiel denied having given the authorization for it -- and the Hagana high command expressed "deep disgust and regret." But the Hagana had in fact approved the attack, if not the massacre.

Likewise, during the bloody climax of the "Altalena" affair in June 1948 -- when the Etzel attempted to smuggle in its own arms shipment and was violently prevented from doing so by the Hagana (now the Israel Defense Forces, incorporating all the Jewish fighting forces, including the Etzel) -- Begin prided himself for not retaliating and thus averting a Jewish civil war.

Begin's rhetorical displays are well covered, both here and in a second biography, *Menachem Begin: A Life*, by journalist and editor Avi Shilon. In the early years of the state, for example, Begin argued that accepting an Israel without East Jerusalem was comparable to permitting a third destruction of the Temple.

Later he nearly did threaten civil war over acceptance of the 1952 Reparations Agreement with Germany. But he was in fact a shrewd politician who could adapt when necessary. Long dismissed by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion as "the MK seated to the right of [MK Yochanan] Bader," Begin eventually learned to withhold his vitriol. Instead he simply referred to Ben-Gurion as "the respondent."

Begin's political career is perhaps most interesting for his departures from what we might call right-wing ideology. Many such departures were prompted by classically Jewish values, such as reverence for the law. Begin, himself a law graduate of the University of Warsaw, called unsuccessfully in the early years of statehood for an Israeli constitution. With better results, he promoted an end to military rule over Israel's Arab communities.

His support from Mizrahim, or Jews from Arab or other Muslim-majority countries, is widely acknowledged. Less familiar are Begin's domestic initiatives, such as Project Renewal, which resulted in the construction of tens of thousands of housing units for lower-income Israelis, along with upgraded infrastructure.

Finally, of course, was his momentous peacemaking with Egypt, a story told captivantly in Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Lawrence Wright's latest effort, *Thirteen Days in September*. Wright's book is the outgrowth of *Camp David*, a play he wrote at the urging of former US president Jimmy Carter's adviser Gerald Rafshoon, which ran successfully in Washington last year. The talks were quite well suited to dramatization. More than once, Carter physically blocked the exit from his cabin when one leader or another threatened to abandon the talks. As for Begin, he comes off without question as the most implacable of the three leaders. The quiet Israeli heroes of the Camp David talks, Wright shows, were fellow negotiators Moshe Dayan, Ezer Weizman, and future Supreme Court president Aharon Barak, who counterbalanced the prime minister's obstinacy.

Wright, a *New Yorker* staff writer, is the best of the three authors at portraying the essence of his protagonists. "When put under stress," he writes, Egyptian president Anwar "Sadat drifted into generalities and Begin clung to minutiae." He quotes the late US ambassador to Israel Samuel Lewis to characterize Begin's negotiating style: "He exhibited a rich arsenal of tools: anger, sarcasm, bombast; exaggeration, wearying repetition of arguments, historical lessons from dark chapters of Jewish history, and stubbornness."

Begin's rigid sense of ceremony is captured in his bristling when Sadat referred to him as "premier" instead of "prime minister." Similarly, Begin insisted on wearing formal attire even in the casual atmosphere of Camp David, explaining that he must observe strict protocol when dealing with two "heads of state."

On Sadat, Wright turns to Henry Kissinger: "His negotiating tactic was never to haggle over detail but to create an atmosphere that made disagreement psychologically difficult."

Both Sadat and Begin enjoyed viewing Westerns, but Sadat the devout Muslim took "a nightcap of whisky" with his. In a particularly moving scene at the Gettysburg battlefield, where Carter had taken the parties to evoke a sense of the historical moment, the president was discussing Lincoln's Gettysburg Address when attendees heard a voice murmuring the speech, word for word. The voice was Begin's.

Of the two biographies, Shilon's, from Yale Press's Jewish Lives series, is the more ambitious, claiming to be the first comprehensive portrait of Begin in Hebrew. And while the English translation of Shilon's book doesn't flow quite as smoothly as Gordis's effort, Shilon wrestles more honestly with Begin's complexities and contradictions. Gordis, for his part, too readily gives Begin the benefit of the doubt, as if failing to do so could undermine his whole argument about the prime minister's value to the Jewish people.

The July 22, 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel, carried out by the Etzel, offers a useful example. Gordis seems uncomfortable dwelling on the tragedy of the event and the planners' recklessness, instead focusing on the end result of the action: "Just seven months after the King David bombing, in February 1947, the British announced their intention to depart Palestine. Nine months after that, the United Nations voted to create a Jewish state. And in May 1948...the Union Jack was lowered, the last British soldiers set sail from Palestine, and the Jewish state was born." And that is the end of the chapter.

By contrast, Shilon, who is generally sympathetic to his subject, uses the King David attack to discuss Begin's penchant for "symbolic showcase operations" without taking into account the possibilities of things going wrong. He writes, "He hardly considered the risks in attacking a hotel crowded with civilians because [Etzel chief operations officer Amichai] Paglin assured him that Etzel would alert the civilians ahead of time and that no one would be hurt."

Begin's mood swings, exacerbated by medications to treat his many health problems, also get fuller treatment in Shilon -- and are referenced in Wright's account as well. In late summer of 1983, with his health faltering and the criticism over the Lebanon war crushing his will to lead, he resigned from office with the simple statement "I cannot go on." He spent his remaining nine years living in seclusion in his famously bare apartment on Zemach Street in Jerusalem.

In the end, readers will be persuaded by Gordis's argument that Begin was guided by his Jewish faith, that he was a Jew first and a Zionist second. They will also be impressed by Gordis's fluent referencing of Jewish material -- his easy access to biblical content, the revival of nearly forgotten historical anecdotes. But the case for Begin's relevance feels strained. Are taxi drivers in Israel today, as Gordis claims, really clamoring for a new Begin? In the months immediately after Camp David, Begin's colleagues Weizman and Dayan were so exasperated by the prime minister's obstructionism that they considered resigning. (Both later did resign.) The question thus remains whether Jewish values alone are sufficient for leadership of a Jewish state -- and what those values might look like when deployed by a leader less extreme.

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