

# Menachem Begin: The Reality

Uri Avnery

The story goes that when Jimmy Carter heard that a man named Menachem Begin had won the Israeli elections, he asked: “Menachem *who?*”

Menachem Begin did not come out of nowhere. He directed one of the most stormy chapters of twentieth-century history: the Jewish underground *Irgun's* war against British rule in Palestine in the 1940's. Afterwards he was for twenty-six years Israel's most prominent opposition leader and, for three years following the 1967 Six-Day War, a minister in the National Unity government. However, when the stunned world heard the news that Menachem Begin was about to become prime minister of Israel—a critical country in a critical region at a critical time—its governments and media had no idea who this man was. The frightened cry, “God Almighty, who is Begin?” echoed in a hundred languages in editorial offices, in foreign ministries, offices of heads of government, and intelligence headquarters.

Such a situation was made possible only by long and habitual denigration of the man. Menachem Begin looked like a has-been on whose head the laurel wreath of the underground had wilted, an aging politician whose influence on the future approached zero. Diplomats and intelligence station chiefs were convinced—as were most Israeli citizens—that the Labor party would rule forever, always finding partners that could be bought politically. Those who took a little more interest in Begin believed that here was a somewhat funny man with exaggeratedly gracious manners and an old-fashioned style of speaking, an ideal object for satirists and for the barbs of coarse *sabra* humor. When it became necessary

to make a quick revision of this characterization, other caricatures appeared.

The most popular caricature for the first moments was that of a violent, bloodthirsty terrorist. Had Begin not stood at the head of a blood-soaked terrorist underground? Had he not blown up the King David Hotel, taking a hundred victims? Had he not ordered the terrible massacre at Dar-Yassin? But no one is further than Menachem Begin from the accepted notion of terrorist. He never carried arms. Even when he commanded the underground, he relied less on arms and bodyguards than on disguise and personality changes—a tourist at Tel Aviv's Savoy Hotel, a lawyer in the Hasidov neighborhood near Petah-Tikva, an unsuccessful rabbi on Bin-Nun Street in Tel Aviv, a German businessman on Rosenbaum Street. He refused to carry a pistol even when there was a reasonable fear that he would be killed on sight the moment he was caught.

Begin never took part in a military action. As *Irgun* commander, he was responsible for the struggle's general leadership, approving plans, restraining unwise acts, and, especially, explaining the acts to the masses. Actual planning was in the hands of operations officers, execution in the hands of battle units. The sight of blood makes Begin shudder. When in 1948 he saw for the first time dead and wounded around him, on the deck of the *Altalena* off the coast of Tel Aviv, he almost fainted. At circumcision ceremonies he turns his head so as not to see the baby's blood. He is very far from the image of the brutal terrorist going out at night to kill and destroy.

The terrorist image, however, has helped Begin. When world leaders and journalists met him and saw before them a polite and most nonviolent man, the relief was so great that their characterization of him changed from one extreme to the other. (The same thing occurs, by the way, to a man with whom Begin detests all comparison: Yassir Arafat. The image created of him—that of unshaven terrorist, pistol-packing murderer of women and children—melts away when one meets a polite politician who makes a gentle impression.)

Begin himself is a civilian from head to toe. In a government that includes three prominent generals,

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replacing a government that was also highly influenced by generals, his civilian image stands out. He may lead the state into a new war, even spark a world war. But he will not do so out of love for playing the role of the decoration-studded general, commanding the troops from his chair. Begin the militarist, like Begin the terrorist, is a simplistic invention of boors.

Who, then, is Menachem Begin? His biography reveals a life rich with accomplishments, but it reveals very little about the man's character. He was born in August, 1913. His father was secretary of the Jewish community in the town of Brest-Litovsk. At thirteen, while a student in the Polish *gymnasium*, he became a member of the Zionist youth movement *Hashomer Batzair*, which only later became Marxist. At sixteen he joined *Betar*, the rightist "revisionist" Zionist youth movement then spreading throughout Poland. At eighteen he moved to Warsaw to study law. He rose to the rank of "command officer" of *Betar* in Poland, responsible for organizational affairs. In 1938 he was appointed *Betar* "commander" for the whole country.

With the fall of Poland in late 1939 he fled the Nazi troops and went to Vilna, which had been annexed to independent Lithuania. When the Soviets entered, he was arrested and sent to the gruesome work camps of the Arctic region. Upon the agreement between Stalin and Polish prime minister in exile, Sihovski, after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, he was freed, as were all Poles there.

Begin joined General Anders's Polish army, which was transferred from the Soviet Union, through Iran and Iraq, to Palestine. Here he served for a year and a half as a Polish soldier until formally discharged in late 1943. Immediately afterwards he was appointed *Irgun* commander. A few weeks later the *Irgun* declared its "revolt" against British rule and in the next four years carried out a series of daring operations that aroused general admiration throughout the world. With the establishment of the state of Israel the *Irgun* disbanded. Begin founded the *Herut* movement to continue the *Irgun*'s struggle on the legal, political plane. As this party's indisputed leader, he headed its ticket in eight election campaigns, never managing to reach victory. The ninth campaign ended on May 17, 1977, and Begin became prime minister.

These are the dry facts. But what do they teach about the man? What drives him? What and who influenced him? What is his spiritual world? What ideal image fires his vision? What character traits guided him up to now—and will guide him in the future? The answers to these questions are crucial for anyone who wants to calculate how this man, who now occupies a key international position, will act.

Generally the surest key to analyzing a man's character can be found in his childhood and his parents' home. But little is known about Menachem Begin's childhood, and what is known comes mostly from Begin himself, revealing only how he views his childhood, post facto. These stories all bear the typical Begin mark. At the

center of Begin's memories stands the father figure, Ze'ev Dov Begin, secretary of the community, who barely supported his wife and three children but always took care to be dressed well—a trait he passed on to his son.

The father is pictured by his son Menachem as the ideal "proud Jew"—a thread that is woven throughout the son's worldview. The Jewish pride is expressed in a story Menachem tells of his father. When he raised his walking stick against two uniformed Poles who were harassing a rabbi, Begin's father was arrested, beaten by the police until he bled—but he returned home happy.

When the great Polish Marshal Józef Pilsudski himself came to the city and severely reprimanded the congregation heads for not putting an end to the Jews' profiteering, the father shocked those present by aggressively replying to the ruler that it is not the Jews' task to serve as informers and spies. When the Nazis moved through Brest-Litovsk in the course of their invasion of the Soviet Union, it marked the end for the local Jews. They were brought to the river, shot, and dumped into the water.

Heading the march to the river was Ze'ev Dov Begin, singing the prayer said before death and the Zionist anthem, *Hatikva*. Such, in any case, is the scene pictured in Begin's mind, fed by eyewitness reports. Begin's brother, Herzl, a mathematician, was killed with his father. Begin was by then in Soviet hands. His sister, Rachel, married to the lawyer Yehoshua Halperin, also managed to escape. His mother, Hasia, who was in the hospital, was murdered there.

In Begin's description of his childhood there also appears an archetypal ideal: the Jewish Mother. Begin's mother was noted for inexhaustible patience—a trait he inherited and which he displays to an unusual degree. He waited patiently for national power for twenty-nine years. In daily life he listens with incredible patience to all sorts of *nudniks*.

Lack of money meant that young Menachem, who graduated from the Jewish primary school, could not continue in one of the town's two Hebrew *gymnasias*. He had to study in the Polish government *gymnasium*. There he received a solid basis of general education, European style—which distinguishes him from the *sabra* politicians, who totally lack higher education. But it was a relatively narrow education. Begin loves to use the Latin he learned in the *gymnasium* and to this day enjoys explaining the origins of foreign terms, just as he prides himself on his knowledge of the Hebrew language, which he learned in childhood.

In the school he encountered anti-Semitism directly, often, according to his stories, getting into fights with non-Jewish pupils over anti-Semitic remarks, and coming home battered but proud, just as his father had come home from the police station. In school he defended his national pride, refusing to write on the Sabbath and fighting for this right. He got low marks in Latin, a subject in which he excelled, after declining to take the exams on a Saturday.

All these stories are very good for official biographies, and serve as excellent material for admiring writers, who have sprung up recently like mushrooms

after the rain. But they teach us very little about the youth Menachem Begin, about the conditions in which he really grew up, about the relationships in his home, about the crises of his childhood and adolescence, about the factors that molded his character.

Quite possibly, more can be learned about the young Begin from looking at photographs from those years. They show a spectacled youth with dreamy, tired eyes, a Jewish nose, and the slightly protruding lower lip that marks Begin. The general impression is not of one who is the life of the party, a natural leader of its revels, a hero to the girls, but of an introverted, delicate youngster, a bookworm, the East European *yeshiva* boy.

Many are tempted to think that Begin's religion is the ritualistic one of the clever politician who wants to use religion for his own purposes. This is not the case. Begin has a deep religious consciousness. He really believes in Divine Providence and in his obligation to it. And it is in complete seriousness that he uses expressions like "thank God," or "with God's help." Without knowing this fact, it is hard to know the man and to understand his past—and future—deeds.

When Begin came to Warsaw at eighteen to study law, he was already a *Betar* veteran and a sworn revisionist. Like most revisionists, he was attracted to the movement by the power of the written word. Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, founder of *Betar*, was first and foremost a journalist, and he influenced people from afar through the written word. His movement arose in 1925 directly out of his writings. Readers of his articles in Riga and in Berlin decided, almost against his will, that a movement had to be founded to fight for the opinions expressed so bluntly and brilliantly in his articles. Jabotinsky's articles made a deep impression on Begin. The demand by the "Head of *Betar*" for an aggressive Zionist policy, emphasizing the importance of military training, his demand to shelve social ideas for the sake of the primacy of the pure national idea—all this spoke straight to the heart of young Begin, who so yearned for "Jewish pride."

When Begin went to Warsaw and showed up at the command offices, Aharon Zvi Propes, *Betar* commander in Poland, decided on the spot to make him one of the nine "command officers" of *Betar* in Poland, head of the organization department. People who knew him in this period remember Begin as an industrious youth, quiet, very ambitious, whose outward appearance did not make an especially positive or negative impression. But from the first moment, it was clear that he was aiming for the top spot.

Begin convinced his comrades, through his dedicated and hard work, that he was the right man for the leadership of the command, especially when *Betar* became a mass youth organization with many thousands of members throughout Poland and Propes was not able to keep up with the movement. When Jabotinsky finally agreed to oust Propes from his position, he appointed Isaac Remba, who had been his own personal secretary. Only afterwards, much too late, was the job given to Begin, for years the most active person in *Betar* headquarters.

The activity was composed entirely of public speaking. Begin combed the length and breadth of Poland, lecturing nonstop. His rhetorical gifts blossomed fully for the first time during this period. Oration became his life's content, his private life—such as it was—finding its place around it. Thus, when he came to speak in the city of Drohobycz, he went, as was customary, to call at the home of the head of the Zionist Revisionist party in town. Begin himself recently related what happened next:

At the table sat two 17-year-old girls, twins. Despite their strong resemblance, I picked out one immediately, and on the spot decided that she would be my wife. The girls were well-educated, and did not participate in the discussion during the meal. After returning to Warsaw, I wrote to the one I had chosen, we began to correspond, and decided to marry.

The twenty-four-year-old Begin asked, during the courtship, for time off from *Betar* to apprentice in court and obtain a lawyer's license. In a few months' time they were wed at a ceremony attended by the illustrious Ze'ev Jabotinsky himself. His wife Alla—Aliza—has been with him ever since, not leaving his side except during the period of his detention in the Soviet Union.

The law apprenticeship did not last long. Begin was called back to work at headquarters, and to speaking. It is impossible to understand Begin the man without seeing Begin the orator. It could almost be said that the orator is the man. Rhetorical ability is not only talent, or an art, or a profession. Rhetorical ability is a character trait. With Begin it is the center of the character, the focus of his personality.

The man of the spoken word is very different from the man of the written word. Very rare are those such as Winston Churchill, Leon Trotsky, or Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who excel in both. Menachem Begin is not one of these. Even his interesting book about his experiences in the underground, *The Revolt*, is strangely disorganized, jumping forward and back and from subject to subject, skipping extremely important events, often preferring to deal with matters of marginal importance. But where his articles arouse little interest, his speeches electrify.

Begin's policy as prime minister is based on his absolute belief that there will be no confrontation between him and the United States. He is sure that his speeches will eventually convince Carter, will persuade him again and again. And if that does not work, his oratory will arouse American Jewry to rebellion, turning on the president and imposing Begin's will. Begin's faith in his views was only briefly shaken by his uncomfortable third encounter with Carter in March. But he appears to have regained his confidence, as his April meeting with Carter indicates.

Like all great orators, Begin is unable to take opposition and criticism. He can listen to an opponent with the utmost patience, debate with people at meetings, listen forbearingly to another's words. But he cannot take real criticism from those close to him. Shmuel Merlin, a friend from Warsaw and fellow faction member in the



*"What is the land of Israel? For Begin...the borders were fixed once and for all after the First World War, when the original Mandate was given to Great Britain. These are the borders that appeared in the emblem of the Irgun and later of the Herut party, and included all of the West Bank and Gaza."*

first Knesset, asserts that Begin stopped saying hello to him after he made some criticism. He moved away from Begin, as did many of his friends at various times for similar reasons. Yet Begin imagines himself a paragon of objectivity.

Natan Yalin-Mor, another comrade from the Warsaw period, and later Begin's rival as head of *Lehi* (another prestate underground group, also known as the "Stern Gang"), relates an amusing anecdote. In 1944 he met Begin underground to discuss the possibility of cooperation between the *Irgun* and *Lehi*. Yalin-Mor asked: "Let us assume we accept your proposal and enter a joint framework. What if there are disagreements between the two organizations? Who will decide?"

Replied Begin: "An objective referee."

"And who will be the referee?" asked Yalin-Mor.

"I will!" answered Begin in all seriousness.

Says Yalin-Mor: "I was amazed. I have never known a less objective man in all my life."

The great orator does not intoxicate only his listeners. He becomes drunk himself. The phenomenon is well-known with Begin. After a major speech in the Knesset he comes down off the podium and out of politeness sits for a few minutes. Then he goes out, paces up and down

the corridor, and with a modest smile accepts the congratulations showered upon him by friends and opponents. His eyes, at these moments, are shrouded, and he is unable to conduct a serious conversation. After half an hour or an hour he functions normally again.

Perhaps this is the greatest danger in the character of the great orator: that he needs his speeches, just as the addict needs his drugs. And since the great orator needs dramatic material to electrify his listeners, the orator-politician is liable to do things whose unconscious purpose is to provide such material.

**M**enachem Begin's activity as prime minister can be summarized by the major speeches he has made—the great speech upon hearing the election results, the speech in Kaddum (the previously disputed *Gush Emunim* settlement in the West Bank), speeches in Washington, speeches before American Jews, and, of course, the speech in the Knesset following Anwar Sadat's historic address—and the speech at the dinner honoring Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel, which contributed to the breaking off of the direct political committee talks between Israel and Egypt.

In fact, Begin's whole life can be described as a mountain ridge whose peaks are composed of speeches, and some of those speeches brought bitter results.

One of the turning points of Begin's life, the 1948 affair of the ship *Altalena*, is connected to three speeches, two of them never delivered.

To this day a mystery surrounds the final stages of negotiation between Begin and Ben-Gurion on the ship's fate. At some point along the way there was a short circuit, accidental or intentional. According to at least one version, this short circuit was caused by a speech. A witness who was at the center of events claims that negotiation was still going on by telephone between Begin and Israel Galili (Ben-Gurion's deputy and a leader of *Hagana*), while the ship sat off Kfar Vitkin and *Irgun* men began to unload the great quantities of arms that had been brought in its hold. At issue was the distribution of these arms.

Begin agreed to turn the arms over to the army, but on condition that 20 per cent of them would go to independent *Irgun* units in Jerusalem (since Jerusalem had not yet been officially annexed to Israel, *Irgun* and *Lehi* units still operated there independently). Begin demanded that the other 80 per cent be handed over to *Irgun* units that had joined the new state's regular army. Galili refused.

Hillel Cook, of the American committee that had sent the ship, came to consult with Begin and vehemently opposed this proposal. "You are creating a dangerous precedent," he hotly asserted. "You are supplying a pretext for discrimination between *Irgun* units and *Hagana* units in the army. Later this will give the *Hagana* an excuse not to equip *Irgun* units with the arms that they will receive. We must turn the weapons over to the army, and demand equality for all units."

The arguments were persuasive. Begin called Galili back and announced: "We have consulted with the comrades. We erred. We agree that 20 per cent be sent to *Irgun* units in Jerusalem, and the other 80 per cent turned over to army stores, where they will be distributed according to needs." And then, according to witnesses, Begin added a strange condition: "An *Irgun* representative will appear before every unit which receives the weapons, to tell it that the arms were brought by the *Irgun*."

Quite possibly this stipulation was the last straw for Ben-Gurion, who at the time desperately hated Begin. In any case, Begin did not get the chance to deliver the hoped-for speech before army troops. After a ten-minute ultimatum, *Hagana* forces opened fire on *Irgun* men exposed on the beach among the ammunition crates. Begin, who had gone there to speak at a parade of the ship's crew, hastily boarded the ship and it sailed to its original destination opposite Frishman Street, Tel Aviv. Speech No. 1. Undelivered.

Israel Eldad, who has also criticized Begin's blind belief in the power of the speech, tells in his book *First Tithes* of Speech No. 2, also undelivered:

When the loudspeakers [which were driven around Tel Aviv] announced that he [Begin] would speak from the deck of the ship opposite Frishman Street, my immediate reaction

was: "A show!" And I did not know, of course, that this show would end in tragedy. Even a great oratory talent must sometimes hold back, must know when are the right circumstances to exploit his gift. A speech from the deck of the arms ship seemed to me an example of his shortsightedness. Furthermore, his very boarding of the ship looked theatrical....

The show at four pm on the beach did not take place. Instead came...Ben-Gurion's order to fire on the ship....

"The speech after the disaster," as Eldad called it, was perhaps the most famous of Menachem Begin's speeches. It went down in history as the "speech of tears." As all his speeches at that time, it was broadcast by the underground *Irgun* radio. Eldad angrily describes it:

And so we came for another crime committed on the same day. The crime of tears. From all the windows and cafes burst forth the voice, the same voice which only a few weeks before, on the day of the declaration of independence, conveyed strength, magnanimity. It was broken. The public is shocked by the fact: The *Irgun* commander is crying in public.

And Eldad adds a stinging comment:

Tears move, but they do not give birth to anything. Laughter is more fertile than crying. And the mighty laugh, which makes enemies shudder, this laugh Menachem Begin has not learned from his hero Jabotinsky.

Not by chance did I bring the name of Jabotinsky in here. At the time of the speech I felt and stated, and later restated: Jabotinsky would not have reacted with tears. No way. He was really made of steel.

The same speech of tears ruined Begin's image for a long time. Hero of the underground who had vanquished the great empire, he was suddenly revealed to Israeli youth as an emotional man, crying in public at a time of stress. To *sabras* unaccustomed to such displays of emotion, who were by now, after six months of war, quite inured to thousands of deaths, it looked like a sign of weakness.

Begin himself is very aware of the criticism of his tears, and he defends them in his book *The Revolt* in a rather apologetic tone:

Whoever has followed my story knows that fate has not pampered me. From my earliest youth I have known hunger and been acquainted with sorrow. And often death has brooded over me, both in the Homeland and on alien soil. But for such things I have never wept. Only on the night when the state was proclaimed: and on the night of the *Altalena*.... Truly there are tears of a salvation as well as tears of grief. There are times when the choice is between blood and tears....

The truth is that Begin cries quite often. When he used to frequent the cinema, his neighbors often saw him shed tears during emotional scenes, especially when they touched upon the fate of the Jews. On the evening after

the *Altalena*, Begin cried because he had seen dead and wounded around him, and the sight shook him. He cried because on that day the thing he feared more than any other occurred: civil war. But the crying was also a rhetorical effect; it was a part of the Great Speech.

Perhaps the most important speech of Begin's life was delivered ten years earlier, in Warsaw. It went down in history as "the squeaking door speech" and had to do with his relations with Ze'ev Jabotinsky, a relationship that raises several questions.

At the end of 1938 there was a split between Jabotinsky and his extreme followers. In this process a rivalry developed between the *Irgun* and *Betar*. Remaining in the *Irgun* were those who believed in an activist line and who opposed the "nationalist institutions" with all their might. *Irgun* activity spread among Polish *Betarists* like a flame in a parched forest. *Betar* could only talk, *Irgun* people acted. Wherever *Betar* chapters existed, *Irgun* cells arose. Official *Betar* began to be emptied of its contents. Menachem Begin liked the *Irgun's* activist line but could not break off from *Betar*.

This is the background for the speech that led to open confrontation between Begin and Jabotinsky. In the fall of 1938 *Betar* held its third world convention in Warsaw. *Irgun* people worked behind the scenes for an activist resolution, against Jabotinsky's will. The original "*Betar* oath," formulated by Jabotinsky, stipulated: "I will ready my arms to defend my people, and will not lift my arms except in defense." The rebel group proposed to change this sentence to: "I will ready my arms in the defense of my people and for conquest of my homeland." Menachem Begin took it upon himself to forward the motion.

Israel Eldad, a delegate to the convention, describes the scene:

Menachem Begin goes up to speak. The *enfant terrible* of Polish *Betar*. That rare combination: A romantic lawyer. He was to Jabotinsky as a Roman pupil to a Greek tutor. Trying to follow in the teacher's footsteps, but by his very nature he cannot match his sensitivity and nobility. Closer to drama, and far from tragedy. Jabotinsky was a man of distilled tragedy. His pupil was simpler, both in thought and in expression. Jabotinsky would often shut his eyes to see, and close his mouth tight in order to think. His pupil—not so. The teacher surpasses his student in beauty....

Begin asserted in his speech that nothing should be expected from the world, that it is a world of wolves. He mentioned the abandonment of Czechoslovakia in the Munich accords several weeks before. The world is brutal, it understands only the language of force and of facts. The time has come to call for revolt.

The words were received with thunderous applause, especially by the Palestinian delegates in the hall, and by Avraham Stern and his *Irgun* people in the balcony.

Eldad describes what followed:

The head of *Betar* asks for the floor immediately after Begin....and he replies. His prose is cutting. His knife has not stopped shining, of course, but now it cuts.



He began with a fable about squeaks. There are three squeaks he hates: The squeak of a wagon before dawn while a person is still sleeping, but it must be excused. After all, it is delivering bread or milk. The squeaking of factory machines or of a train on the rails is not pleasing to the ear either but it too, when it comes down to it, benefits the public. But there is one kind of squeak which he hates with all his heart, and it is unpardonable because it does absolutely no good: The squeak of a door on its hinges. And your speech, Mr. Begin, was such a squeaky door.

And after this cutting fable came the tragic political prose: There exists arithmetic. There is a balance of power. We are not yet strong enough, and therefore should not mouth off about revolt.

And another fable, a classic one: Once, in a certain place, there occurred a disaster, a fire. There were many victims, and numerous children were orphaned. They began to care for them. At first, the orphans were parceled out to various homes. But after a while the good people grew tired of the strange children. Bitterness and resentment developed. Then a wise man came forth and said: Even the best man does not want strangers in his home. His generosity must be calculated at a normal human level. And his suggestions: Everyone will contribute to the building of an orphanage. The children will be taken out of the private homes, to the satisfaction of those now caring for them, but nor will they be abandoned, for they will have an orphanage.

The world is not so generous that every state, even the most democratic, will accept Jewish refugees in its borders. But neither is the world so cruel as to refuse all help. The best of the nations will support with all their hearts the idea of a Hebrew state. It will be like the orphanage in the fable.

And finally: If you, Mr. Begin, do not believe that the world has a conscience any more, you might as well take a walk to the deep river Vistula.

Then Eldad himself took the floor, although he was new to this company, and took upon himself to define the difference between the "19th century mentality," clearly hinting at Jabotinsky, and the "20th century mentality," meaning the *Irgun* people and Begin. Jabotinsky could not take it. He stood up and left the hall in the middle of the speech. He could not accept his pupils' new style, influenced by events of fascist Europe, estranged from the ideals of beauty and nobility that were his world.

The new style was victorious. The convention passed the amendment proposed by Begin, against the advice of the Head of *Betar*. After that Jabotinsky was again elected Head of *Betar*, unanimously.

When a foreign journalist recently asked Begin's devoted secretary, Yehiel Kadishai, about the new prime minister's opinions, Kadishai answered him curtly: "Go read Jabotinsky!"

It was good advice. Begin is not a man of theory and does not have many original opinions. Jabotinsky has written the whole theory. Begin sees himself as the executor of his teaching. Once, in the underground, he said to Eldad: "When I give an order, I feel the head of *Betar* standing behind me and commanding me to give the order!" No doubt Begin sees himself as one who not only carries out the will of Providence but also the testament of Jabotinsky.

The judgment on Begin's spiritual closeness to Jabotinsky, or distance from him, depends, of course, on the judge's point of view. In many respects there is a direct continuity. In others a chasm stretches between them.

Jabotinsky was born into an assimilationist family from Odessa. He was exposed to the world's civilization. He saw foreign countries at a young age, studied in liberal Italy, sent home *feuilletons* full of culture and wit. He was a man of deep optimism, believed in the civilized nations and humanity's conscience, and was therefore capable of being a true liberal. He was a nationalist in the spirit of Giuseppe Mazzini, the intellectual leader of the Italian national movement of the last century, who saw no contradiction between his nationalism and his adherence to the ideal of general human progress. Jabotinsky loved the Italians, the French, and especially the British. Britain was, in a certain sense, the love of his life.

Begin came from a very different tradition and grew up in a very different era. His family was orthodox, their horizons narrow. They were faced with constant anti-Semitism in a then half-fascistic Poland ruled by Marshal Josef Pilsudski, and in a Europe in which Mussolini had already risen to power, a Europe about to fall to Adolf Hitler. In Begin's book anti-British hatred jumps out of every page—even though the book was written after the end of the conflict, when the former enemy could be seen in a more balanced perspective.

Their attitudes toward religion accent the difference between Begin and Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky was an extreme secularist, who had no doubt a strictly secular Jewish state in mind. He raised his son Eri in an

antireligious spirit, and Eri became an extreme advocate of the separation of Church and State. In his later days he compromised with the orthodox, apparently out of tactical considerations, but even then only adopted the general slogan of "enrooting the values of the Torah in the life of the nation."

All this is very different from Begin's deep religious feeling: His whole worldview is anchored in the particularity of the people of Israel, its religion and its tradition. Eri Jabotinsky joked: "I don't mind Begin's positive attitude towards religion. What annoys me is that he believes in it!" The words could have been his father's.

Ze'ev Jabotinsky's romantic optimism knew no bounds. Jabotinsky could not have believed in a holocaust, because he did not believe in war. A few days before Hitler's armies invaded Poland, signaling the end for its millions of Jews, Jabotinsky wrote an article in which he fervently declared that there would be no war, since all peoples know of the horrible destructive power of modern weapons, and none of them would be mad enough to employ them. When some questioned this analysis, Jabotinsky still managed, on the very eve of the war, to write another article that mocked the questioners. This optimism killed him.

A myth was woven around Jabotinsky's relationship with Begin, as around that of Lenin with Stalin, and for similar reasons. In order to fulfill his task as *Irgun* commander, and later as head of the *Herut* movement, Begin needed a cloak of legitimacy to foster recognition of his role as heir apparent. Begin was certainly not one of the narrow circle of Jabotinsky's close disciples like Propes, Merlin, and Remba. Only very late did Jabotinsky appoint Begin to the job of *Betar* commander for Poland. He had nothing to do with Begin's appointment as *Irgun* commander. But over the years things change their form, and apparently even Begin now believes there was a sort of direct mystical connection between him and the head of *Betar*.

At the time of Jabotinsky's death something happened that revealed one of Begin's most outstanding character traits, his romantic-chivalrous attitude, bordering on quixotism—and not infrequently crossing the border.

In Vilna, Begin received a letter from Palestine in which he was criticized for fleeing Warsaw: "A captain is the last to leave a sinking ship!" Begin was moved, called a meeting of *Betar* commanders, and announced that he had decided to return to Warsaw, then under Nazi occupation. His comrades only barely managed to talk him out of it. Such gestures are a leitmotif of Begin's life. When Ben-Gurion's artillery opened fire on the *Altalena* off the Tel Aviv shore, Begin was on the deck. The ship, loaded with ammunition, could have exploded into a million bits. Its American captain raised a white flag. Begin demanded that the flag be taken down. It was, but then was raised again.

The comrades demanded that Begin get off the ship and save his life. Begin refused. "He wanted to die on the ship!" reported Shmuel Merlin, who was injured on board. One of Begin's opponents jokes: "He saw himself standing on the ship's bridge, saluting and sinking with it, like a loyal captain. He forgot that the ship was stuck in the sand and could not sink." Finally his



comrades forcefully shoved Begin from the ship into the water.

The clear implication: With Begin, the concept of honor replaces rational thought, and the quixotic gesture is liable to replace cold calculation. For a prime minister a very dangerous trait.

**T**he Soviets invaded Vilna in June, 1940, and there Begin was arrested and sentenced to imprisonment in a correctional labor camp for a period of eight years.

By the time these eight years were up, on April 1, 1949, Begin was already a member of the Israeli Knesset. But this lay in the future. The Soviet authorities sent him to the terrible hard labor camps in the Arctic region, about which, years later, he wrote in *White Nights*. When the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, he was freed, he enlisted in Anders's army and went to Palestine. His wife was already there.

In Poland Begin had not left *Betar* for the *Irgun*, as had many of his friends. The *Irgun*, at that time, cried out for a leader. It had undergone a series of shocks, inner conflicts, and a sharp drop in morale. A consensus was arrived at: the best man for taking over the *Irgun* command was Menachem Begin. In December, 1943, a discharge from the Polish army finally obtained, Begin assumed the command of the *Irgun*.

A few weeks later the great revolt began with a formal declaration of war written by Begin. It was one of his written speeches, which played a major role in the *Irgun*'s war. Begin insisted that such a declaration was necessary and that it should be published before the first action—even if it was not received seriously, even if it meant loss of the element of surprise. The Begin style—rhetorical and chivalrous—began to make its mark on the *Irgun*.

The *Irgun*'s war was without doubt the most effective and successful underground campaign of the twentieth century, though for fairness's sake, and retrospectively, it must be noted that this was possible only because the British acted with great restraint. There were exceptions, but the British did not apply the most extreme repressive measures. Begin failed to recognize this fact. But the struggle would certainly have had a different outcome had the *Irgun* taken on a Soviet, American, or—for that matter—Israeli occupation regime.

The years of struggle were Begin's greatest period of achievement until he became prime minister. His first great success was rebuilding the shattered organization, breathing new life into it, and turning it into an extremely effective fighting force. His second achievement was maintaining a sense of proportion in an organization that was not lacking adventurers who were ready for anything. Begin excelled in exercising caution, and according to some critics was even overcautious. Thus, for example, again and again he rejected the notion of immediately declaring an underground government—something that would have given the *Irgun* international standing and undermined that of the official "national institutions." His third great achievement, and perhaps the major one, was the prevention of civil war.

Quite possibly any other person in his place would have retaliated when the Jewish authorities declared "open season," hunting down *Irgun* people and turning them over to the British police, who tortured them and sent them to prison in Africa. If bloody reprisals were prevented, the credit must go to Begin alone. It required the highest motivation, a national fanaticism that could overcome organizational zealotry. It also required incredible self-restraint and patience. Begin was considerably criticized on this point, even by heads of the League for a Free Palestine in America. His critics say that Begin actually helped his rival, Ben-Gurion, rise to power, and that he turned the *Irgun* into the "shooting agency" of the Jewish Agency.

This did not bother Begin. He did not want to take power by force. Before him stood the example of Garibaldi, who advocated the establishment of an Italian republic but accepted the monarchist regime when he saw that it made the achievement of Italian unity easier.

The Israeli public saw Begin for the first time when he surfaced from underground. They examined him curiously. His Great Speech on the day of the State's establishment—in which he gave Ben-Gurion's government his stamp of approval despite the fact that he himself and the whole Revisionist camp were not allowed to participate—was still broadcast over the underground radio. So was the "speech of tears." But then the citizens of Israel saw him speaking from a balcony in Tel Aviv's Mograbi Square and in the nearby Gan Rina cinema. They saw a moustached, spectacled man, an exciting speaker, with a pathos that was quite out of style in the country. As opposed to Jabotinsky, who employed very little movement while speaking, Begin gesticulated nonstop.

The first impression of postunderground Begin was described by a skilled observer: author-journalist Arthur Koestler. He first met Begin underground, but the two had sat in a dark room; the only light was from cigarettes in an adjoining chamber. At their second meeting, when he saw Begin's face for the first time, Koestler wrote:

Judging [at the underground meeting] from his voice, which came from across the table in the darkness, I imagined that its owner was tall, with the face of an ascetic whose expression portrayed fanaticism. Actually he is relatively short, thin, weak, very nearsighted, with the face of a young teacher, refined and serious...his nature is a sort of inflexibility out of self-defense, characteristic of people who arrive at a compromise with their shyness. He speaks reasonably, without fanaticism, just as his propaganda is bombastic and stormy.

His clothes do not fit. They are a size too big...he has charm, but dry and stale.

In the book he wrote at the time, *The Revolt*, Begin spoke several times, partly in jest, partly seriously, about his external appearance. He defined himself as an ugly person.

The new party won 14 out of 120 seats in the 1949 elections to the first Knesset. After the formation of a party came Begin's fifth great achievement, which was to last twenty-nine years: He remained undisputed leader



of the party, even though he lost eight consecutive election campaigns. This achievement is unequalled in any state with democratic elections. The Israeli public was not yet ripe for an extreme nationalist leader, a rightist. It was afraid of Menachem Begin. And occasionally Begin himself supplied fuel for this fear.

The breakthrough in Begin's fortunes came in 1967, when Gamal Abdal Nasser concentrated his forces in Sinai. Begin was consumed with anxiety, as was most of the country. He proposed turning power over to his archrival, David Ben-Gurion, coiner of the slogan "Government without *Herut* and without the Communists" and the man who, four years earlier in a letter to the poet Haim Guri, had defined Begin as a "disciple of Hitler."

At the height of the crisis, the National Unity government was formed, and Menachem Begin became a minister (without portfolio). This was a decisive step for him, because for the first time the boycott by the heirs of the "organized community" against the leader of the "secessionists" was broken. The *Herut* movement, and Begin himself, received something that is invaluable in political life: legitimacy. Inside the government Begin's responsible behavior made a strong impression on his colleagues. He did not leak. He played by the rules. He remained loyal. Many of the fears he had aroused over the years dissolved. More important it became obvious that there was no great gulf between Begin's approach and that of Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, and company. The difference was only tactical, a matter of degree and style but not of content.

The government grew to rely on Begin's formulations in preparing important resolutions and documents. It accepted his definition of the occupied territories as "our ancestors' heritage." When Begin walked out on the government in August, 1970, because he objected to acceptance of the Rogers initiative for a cease-fire that included the word "withdrawal," his public image was already different from the one that had prevailed when he joined the government three years previously. Gone was the last psychological barrier to his rise to power. The rest was only a matter of time.

On the eve of victory, what befell Moses—death on the threshold of the promised land—almost befell Menachem Begin. Soon after his visit to the United States in March, 1977, he was struck by a massive heart attack, which took him out of the election campaign until its finale. Cynics claim that it helped the *Likud*, since in Begin's absence it was easier to obscure the extreme aspects of his policy.

Begin took control of the affairs of state with amazing naturalness. One day he sat in the party building, the next day in the prime minister's office. It was as if his whole life had been training for that moment. The three years in the National Unity government helped him in this respect as well. He knew how the government functions in practice.

But things have changed. Begin has virtually established a kind of presidential regime. In his government there is one man who makes decisions. The others are aides, advisors, and especially executors. Cabinet ses-



sions are run like headquarters meetings—no smoking, no small talk, no pointless debate. Issues are brought up for brief discussion, information is presented, and decisions are taken. Usually the decision is Menachem Begin's. There are hardly any difficulties from within; since all cabinet members are aware of Begin's absolute superiority. When one of his steps—like the sudden appointment of Moshe Dayan to the foreign ministry—arouses opposition, the opposition quickly fizzles out. Begin patiently explains his arguments to the other side, and they are almost always accepted.

Two things can be said with certainty: Begin has now absolute authority, playing the keys of the political system like a virtuoso pianist; and he is the happiest man in the world. Since taking on the task of prime minister he radiates happiness. Like any happy person, he apparently wants to share his happiness with the whole world. His cup runneth over with friendship for his opponents, he outdoes himself to demonstrate correct relations toward them, and he tries to convince them that his way is right.

What is the source of this happiness? The banal explanation is that this is the happiness of a man who waited for twenty-nine consecutive years of failure for his moment and has now arrived. Six months after the election, five months after Begin's assumption of office, a solid reason was provided for all this happiness. The incredible happened. Anwar el-Sadat came to Jerusalem.

How much was this historic decision influenced by Begin's victory? According to Sadat himself, he decided on his great initiative because Begin was a man who could say yes or no. But this was, at best, a minor consideration. The timing was decided upon by Sadat in response to Egyptian needs and longings.

For Begin it was a case of sheer luck. The leader of the greatest Arab nation came to Israel to offer peace, recognition, and security. And to whom did he come? Not to Ben-Gurion. Not to Eshkol. Not to Golda Meir. Not to Rabin. Not to any of the socialists. But to him, the pupil of Jabotinsky, the terrorist, the man who had been called a "Jewish Hitler," a political failure, an anachronism; the man who had been rejected by the Israeli voters eight times because he was a man of war. Could

there be a greater cause for satisfaction, for real happiness?

Since then the meeting of these two unlikely partners has dominated the world scene. They are vastly different personalities, but also strangely similar. One was born in a large Egyptian village, the other in a small Polish town. Both fought in the underground against the British. One was sentenced to prison, the other liable to be shot on sight. Both came to power after a long wait. Both are now absolute masters in their countries. Neither has any real advisor. Both make their decisions themselves.

Beyond that, both have a flair for the dramatic, for the big gesture that appeals to the masses, for the Big Speech. It is the similarity that hides the real difference. Begin is a True Believer, a man with an Ideology. Sadat is basically a pragmatist. People all over the world, in Israel, and in Egypt ignore this fact because they want to. They want Begin to be something else. They want a new Begin. So they invent one.

They were greatly helped by Begin himself. He fell easily into the new role—Begin the Peacemaker. He handled Sadat beautifully. His gestures were right, his intuition unerring. Everything was done to ease the way of the Egyptian leader. In everything, that is, except matters of substance. Because, of course, the two had quite different kinds of peace in mind.

For Sadat, peace was a simple matter. Israel had to give up all the territories it had conquered in 1967, to agree to some kind of a Palestinian state. This would satisfy Arab honor. In return, Israel would get all it needed: real peace, full recognition, all possible security arrangements. For Begin it was not that simple. He is bound by the Ideology, as handed down by Jabotinsky. For people who did not know this it was easy to misunderstand completely Begin's so-called peace plan. Unfortunately, very few people have taken the trouble to study the Jabotinsky who has so influenced Begin.

Uncounted times in his youth Menachem Begin sang the greatest of Ze'ev Jabotinsky's poems, the *Betar* anthem. With a choked voice he recited it in the cemetery of Soviet Vilna on the seventh day after the "*Head of Betar's*" death. For him it is not a song but a living testament, a way of life, practical policy, a plan of action. It ends with the words: "To die or to conquer the mountain—Yodfet, Massada, Betar."

*Yodfet*, the Galilean fortress, fell to the Romans after a valiant and suicidal defense.

*Massada* was the Dead Sea mountain stronghold where the great Jewish revolt came to an end with the mass suicide of all the remnants, men, women, and children.

*Betar* was the Judean town where the last Jewish revolt perished, putting an end to the Jewish commonwealth in Palestine for nearly two thousand years.

For Prime Minister Menachem Begin, these three names are shining symbols, lighting his path.

In Begin's peace plan the occupied lands are divided into two sharply different categories. Sinai and the Golan do not belong to the Land of Israel, Eretz Israel. It is therefore easy to give them up. Here Begin can be flexible, and is. The West Bank and the Gaza Strip belong to the the Land of Israel. It is unthinkable for

Begin to give them up. Though there is renewed talk of Resolution 242's applicability to the West Bank, Begin remains adamant. In a recent interview with the *Washington Post*, for instance, Begin insisted that although everything was negotiable, in the sense that Israel welcomed any Arab proposals, he could not foresee any conceivable set of circumstances in which he would be willing to make any territorial compromises on the West Bank.

I found it extremely difficult to explain this ideological conviction to Egyptian leaders. What is the land of Israel? For Begin, as for Jabotinsky, the borders were fixed once and for all after the First World War, when the original Mandate was given to Great Britain. These are the borders that appeared in the emblem of the *Irgun* and later of the *Herut* party, and include all of the West Bank and Gaza.

In his peace plan, Begin offered the Palestinian Arabs (whom he calls, in Hebrew, "Arabs of Eretz Israel") administrative autonomy. To the uninformed, including the world press, this looked like a big step toward self-determination and eventual statehood. Nothing is further from the truth. Autonomy is a term coined by Jabotinsky and applies specifically to a national minority. In 1906 the young Jabotinsky was the moving spirit of the Helsingfors (Helsinki) conference, a gathering of the Zionists of czarist Russia. The outcome of this conference was the Helsingfors Program, formulated by Jabotinsky, which demanded autonomy for the Jews and all other national minorities in Russia. Its terms are practically identical with the new Begin plan for the Arabs in the land of Israel. Autonomy for a national minority in a land governed by others—but most definitely *not* autonomy for the territories as such.

What this means is undeclared annexation. The West Bank and Gaza will be governed by Israel, controlled by the Israeli army and police, populated by Israeli settlers, with the Arabs enjoying the right to govern themselves as a community according to their own customs. This is the package Begin is trying to sell Sadat. He knows the difficulty. It would amount to a camouflaged separate peace with Egypt, shelving the Palestinian problem.

Knowing that this is hard for Sadat to accept, Begin is uneasy. His Big Speech in the Knesset in November following Sadat, a unique opportunity, was well below his best standard, even from a rhetorical point of view. At the press conference in Ismailia, another great opportunity, he made some uncharacteristically tactless remarks, wounding Egyptian sensibilities. This uneasiness has continued and multiplied in the face of American pressures.

The big question now is: What will Begin do if peace cannot be reconciled with his ideology? The fate of the Middle East, indeed of the whole world, may well depend on the answer. It is a battle that will have to be fought in the heart and mind of Begin himself. On the one hand, the temptation to make peace is immense. If he achieves this, his name will be inscribed forever in the annals of Jewish history: Ben-Gurion created the State of Israel, Begin gave it peace. But equally great is his loyalty to the Cause, the teachings of Jabotinsky, the Land of Israel.