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# MENACHEM BEGIN

The Battle for Israel's Soul

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לא בזכות הכח שבנו לארץ אבותינו, שבנו אליה בכח הזכות

*We returned to the land of our ancestors not by virtue of might but by  
the virtue of right.*

—MENACHEM BEGIN

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## INTRODUCTION

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### Who Was That Man?

“I observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun;  
the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them;  
and the power of their oppressors—with none to comfort them.”

—*Ecclesiastes 4:1*

One of my most vivid college memories is of Menachem Begin. It was November 1977, the first semester of my freshman year. The radio was on, and I heard the news that President Anwar Sadat of Egypt had accepted Prime Minister Begin’s invitation to come to Jerusalem.

I can still picture the moment. The doorway in front of me, my roommate’s desk to the left. The cinder-block walls we’d painted soon after we’d moved in. I leaned my head against the door frame, closed my eyes, and prayed that Begin would stay alive long enough to see the process through.

I knew virtually nothing about Begin then. I’d lived in Israel for a couple of years as a young child but had been all too happy to depart, and subsequently ignored Israeli politics almost entirely. I still cared enough about Israel, though, that the newscast stopped me in my tracks. The prospect of peace in Israel was so stunning that, for the first time in my life, I found myself begging some power out there to take care of Menachem Begin.

It may have been the first time that I truly prayed.

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Four years later, on my honeymoon in Hawaii, I was walking back from the beach with my new wife when we stopped to peer into a local newspaper vending machine. “Israel Bombs Iraqi Nuclear Reactor,” the headline said, and we both laughed out loud. People in Hawaii, it seemed, would believe anything.

Back at the hotel, we absentmindedly turned on a brand-new cable network called CNN. Israel, it reported, had destroyed Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor. The attack had been ordered by Menachem Begin. We asked ourselves and each other questions people had been asking about Begin for decades: Had he just made the world safer, or had he recklessly endangered it? Was the attack reprehensibly irresponsible, as the United States would soon claim, or was it the courageous step of someone who knew better than anyone else how to safeguard the future of the Jewish people?

I never met Begin, never even saw him in person. But he is an indelible part of my freshman year, my honeymoon, and many other subsequent moments I will never forget. When my wife and I eventually moved our family to Israel many years later, countless taxi drivers, listening to the news of whatever calamity was unfolding at the moment, would turn around to tell me, “You know what this country needs? We need Menachem Begin.”

It was not only the taxi drivers. Even Israel’s left-leaning newspaper, *Haaretz*, which had regularly railed against his policies, sometimes wondered wistfully when the next Begin would appear. In 2012, twenty years after Begin died, *Haaretz* published a long retrospective on his life entitled “Menachem Begin—the Man Who Transformed Israel.” And several months later, when Israel was caught up in yet another international crisis, a *Haaretz* column noted that “in 1977, it was Menachem Begin who began to extricate Israel from its isolation. It is unclear if there is anyone willing and able to do so in 2013.”<sup>1</sup>



Everyone, it seems, misses Menachem Begin.

I wrote this book to find out why. I wanted to understand how someone so polarizing, so controversial, in his own country and abroad, can appear today as the soul not only of Israel's best self but as a living fusion of Jewish consciousness and national aspiration.

All of Israel's founders made extraordinary journeys, but it is hard to imagine any of them enduring an odyssey anything like Begin's. He fled the Nazis, lost his parents and brother, was imprisoned by the Soviets and hunted by the British. Condemned by Albert Einstein and Hannah Arendt in the pages of *The New York Times*, scorned by Israel's political elites, portrayed by many as a demagogue, and relegated to the political opposition for twenty-eight years, he served as prime minister for six years, and in that time made peace with Egypt, received the Nobel Peace Prize, and destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor. He also led Israel into its most unpopular war, resigned as a result of the war's dark course before his term was completed, and went into seclusion for almost a decade. An orator who thrived on crowds, he was almost never seen or heard from again.

When he died, though, tens of thousands of people choked the streets of Jerusalem, desperate to make their way to the Mount of Olives, where he was buried. They hadn't forgotten him. They wanted to say good-bye. And they wanted to thank him.

To thank him for what? What was it that Menachem Begin evoked in Israelis and in Jews worldwide? Loved by many, reviled by others, his life and the principles to which he was committed touched something profound in Jews almost everywhere. The key to Begin's abiding grip on the memory and fascination of Israelis and Jews around the world was bound up with his unabashed, utter devotion to the Jewish people. Committed to Israel though he was, Menachem Begin's life was a story of commitment first and foremost to the Jewish people. Many of Israel's founders Hebraized their names (Ben-Gurion actually required diplomatic personnel and civil servants above a certain rank to do so<sup>2</sup>). David Ben-Gurion



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was born David Grün. Ariel Sharon's original last name was Scheinermann. Golda Meir had been Golda Meyerson. But Menachem Begin did not change his name. His Jewish roots were the only roots that he needed or wanted; when called upon to testify before a commission of the Knesset toward the end of his life, and asked to state his name, he answered, simply, "Menachem ben Dov ve-Chasia Begin." It was not an Israeli name, but a Jewish one. It was a reminder that Israel mattered only if the Jews mattered. He never became the toned and bronzed Israeli in the new tradition of Dayan, Sharon, or Yitzhak Rabin, nor a self-invented member of the old guard like Ben-Gurion. He had no need for that. His devotion to Israel was an irrepressible facet of the European Jew he had always been, and unlike many of Israel's founders, he saw no reason to leave that tradition or legacy behind.

In the age of the "new Jew," Begin carried with him a fierce pride in what he had inherited. The love that Israelis and Jews around the world felt for him, regardless of what they may have thought of his policies, derived in large measure from his having reminded them who they were and would always be.

This book is the story of Menachem Begin's life, but it is also the story of what he evoked in Jews, of what he said to the world about Jewish history and the Jewish people, and of the legacy he bequeathed to the state he was instrumental in creating.

Given how fascinating, perplexing, controversial, and beloved he was, it should come as no surprise that Menachem Begin's life has been thoroughly researched. He is the subject of several biographies, including the recent comprehensive treatment by Avi Shilon, *Menachem Begin: A Life* (recently translated from the Hebrew). Other biographies have been written by a longtime friend and advisor (Harry Hurwitz), by foreign journalists (Eric Silver and Ned Temko), by an Israeli journalist (Eitan Haber), by those who served with Begin in the Jewish underground or worked with him in government (Aryeh Naor, among others). Other writ-



ers composed biographies even when he was still in office (Aviezer Golan and Shlomo Nakdimon), and another wrote a volume with a psychological bent (Ofer Grosbard), seeking to get to the core of what animated him. Memoirs, such as Hart Hasten's *I Shall Not Die*, include lengthy personal recollections of Begin. Yehuda Avner (Begin's colleague, friend, and English speechwriter, who subsequently served as Israel's ambassador to Australia and the United Kingdom) is the author of *The Prime Ministers*, which has done more than any other book to bring Menachem Begin to the attention of an English-reading generation that knew little of him. All of these books have contributed immensely to this volume.

In addition to these and other biographies, Begin was covered widely in the press, both in Israel and abroad. There are voluminous archives at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center, the Jabotinsky Institute in Israel, and Israel's National Archives. And, because Begin lived not long ago, there are still scores of people alive who had extensive interaction with him. Many of those people were kind enough to be interviewed and to contribute further insight to this study.

This book makes no attempt to offer itself as a definitive biography of Menachem Begin. It takes no stand on what Begin would have thought Israel ought to do today. Nor does it pretend to cover every dimension of Begin's fascinating, multifaceted public and private life. Many of the events in which Begin was involved are still shrouded in mystery or mired in controversy. I have adopted the positions that seem to me supported by the strongest evidence, but I am fully aware that on some key issues, deeply knowledgeable people disagree on key facts and interpretations.

In a book of this length, there are, of necessity, many dimensions of Begin's life that are either addressed far too briefly or left altogether untouched. Drawing on research already done and coupling it with new archival work and numerous new interviews, my goal was—a century after Begin's birth—to bring his extraordinary life to the attention of an even wider audience and to look at his life through the lens of the passion he still evokes. What was the “magic” of his draw? What was it about him that touched so deep a nerve in Jewish people, as well as in non-Jews, in





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Israel and throughout the world? I hope that this book will help address those questions.

Perhaps most important, I hope that this book 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.



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