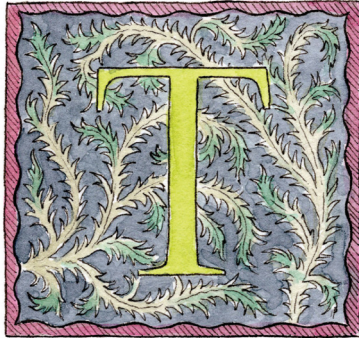


ELI LAKE

Learning from Menachem Begin

*Hadar inspired Begin's character.
It should do the same for us*



TO STAND with Israel these days exacts a social cost. Friendships can be strained, dinner parties disrupted. Expressing the view that Israel has not only a right but an obligation to defend itself invites abuse and even physical danger. If trends continue, many American Jews may conclude that public displays of Zionism are not worth the costs: argument, pressure, ostracism.

They might want to take some life lessons from Menachem Begin.

Today, Israel's sixth prime minister is remembered — depending on who is doing the remembering — as the bold peacemaker with Egypt. Or as the expander of West Bank settlements. Or as the villain of the Deir Yassin massacre. Or as the man who spared the world a catastrophe when he ordered the bombing of Saddam Hussein's nuclear reac-

tor. Or as the prime minister who took the fall for the invasion of Lebanon and the Phalangist massacre at Sabra and Shatila.

Yet these episodes — many of them, such as Deir Yassin, grossly distorted and widely misunderstood — hardly tell the full story of Begin the man. They also miss what made him such a compelling figure to generations of Israelis and Jews, and why he remains as relevant as ever to the character and prospects of the Jewish people.

What made Begin the man he was can be summed up in one word: *hadar*. In Hebrew, it means a combination of glory, self-respect, honor, and dignity. For Begin and his mentor, Vladimir “Ze’ev” Jabotinsky, from whom he learned the concept, *hadar* was a rejection of the Jewish victimhood portrayed in Chaim Nachman Bialik’s poetry — scattered, scared, always living at the mercy of hostile hosts, watching mutely as their wives and daughters were raped in 1903 Kishinev:

*In that dark corner, and behind the cask
Crouched husbands, bridegrooms, brothers peering down
the cracks...*

Jews with *hadar* would no longer accept being spectators to their humiliation and annihilation. The new Jew would be proud. He would fight back, energized by the components of *hadar*.

Defiance

Begin’s first mentor, his father Ze’ev Dov Begin, modeled *hadar* in his daily life. The world of Begin’s childhood in Brest-Litovsk, Belarus, was entirely hostile to Jews. They were barred from universities, forced to live in segregated shtetls, and at perpetual risk of pogroms and humiliation at the hands of more powerful Gentiles.

The Begins did not accept their victimization. Ze'ev refused to speak Polish because he considered it an antisemitic language and urged his children to speak only Hebrew in the home. He had a walking stick engraved with a line from Émile Zola's famous defense of Alfred Dreyfus, "J'Accuse...!" In a tale that parallels Matisyahu's defiance of a Seleucid officer in the book of Maccabees, Ze'ev once used the stick to strike a Polish policeman who was trying to cut off his beard. From an early age, Begin learned from his father's example that Jews could defy the terms of their oppressors.

Stoicism

Begin rose through the ranks of Jabotinsky's youth organization, Betar, eventually becoming the leader of its Polish branch. After the Soviet and Nazi armies invaded Poland in 1939, Begin and his wife Aliza fled. They ended up in Vilnius, where Begin was closely watched by the Soviet NKVD.

When the secret police finally arrested him, he was ready. He polished his shoes, informed his friend Israel Scheib that he was forfeiting their chess match, and bid goodbye to Aliza. He was taken to Lukiškės Prison, where he was forced to sit on a chair in a darkened room with his knees pressed against the wall for nearly three straight days. Such an experience would destroy most men. Not Begin: He demanded a correction to the minutes of his interrogation, insisting that the record reflect that he admitted merely to being a member of Betar, as opposed to admitting *his guilt* in being a member of Betar.

From Lukiškės, Begin was shipped to the Pechora Gulag, near the northern Urals. There, he subsisted on watery porridge and was forced to do back-breaking labor. In his first memoir, *The Revolt*, Begin summarizes the creed of the Gulag in the phrase "You'll get

used to it.” It meant that all the deprivations of the prison camp would become routine after a while:

When you find the first louse on your body your whole being is revolted. But, no matter—you’ll get used to it. Soon you will get used to doing without a clean shirt, and to the hundreds of lice which cover what used to be your clean underclothes. The first louse is a terrifying creature. The hundredth is an accepted neighbor. It is no longer repulsive; it is part of your existence.

Faith

After he recounted being packed into a car with over a dozen other prisoners in the move northeast from Lukiškės to Pechora—one of whom whispered, “This is the beginning of the journey to Eretz Israel”—Begin wrote in reflection that “faith is perhaps stronger than reality; faith itself creates reality.” Despite the hardship and squalor of the Gulag, Begin never forgot to be a Jew. On Yom Kippur, he would refuse his meager rations. For Passover, he held a secret seder with his cellmate despite the great risk that the guards would find out. Substituting four cups of rationed coffee for the wine in horrid conditions, they somehow had the fortitude to say, “We once were slaves in Egypt, but now we are free.” A helpful reminder that our people have endured far worse than shout-downs and die-ins on campus.

Honor

After nearly a year at Pechora, Begin was one of tens of thousands of prisoners who were freed to enlist in the Polish army in the fight against the Axis powers. These forces were sent to the Middle East theater, where Begin reunited with Aliza in Mandatory Palestine and soon resumed

work to help build a Jewish state. Months after he was discharged from the army, he was appointed to lead the Irgun, the Jewish underground militia founded on Jabotinsky's Revisionist Zionist philosophy. Three months after taking the helm, Begin declared rebellion against the British and vowed, "No more cease-fire in the Land of Israel." In the summer of 1946, the Irgun would be responsible for the bombing of the British military headquarters at the King David Hotel.

Later in 1946, after Irgun fighters were captured and flogged as punishment—to Begin, "a bestial punishment" of "shame and humiliation"—the Irgun announced a new policy, floggings for floggings. "If you whip us we shall whip you," the militia warned. His fighters went hunting for British officers, removed their trousers, and administered the same number of lashes as had been delivered to the Irgun men. No Jews were flogged in Mandatory Palestine after these reprisals. The next summer, the Irgun's strategy escalated to hangings for hangings in response to the British Empire's execution of an Irgun fighter. As Begin wrote, "It was our duty to pay the hangman in precisely his own coin."

It was all quite ironic. In Russia, Begin had been charged with being an agent of British imperialism. Now he was hunted by the British Empire even while it fought the Nazis. As far as Begin was concerned, the British, through the cruel restrictions specified in the 1939 White Paper on Jewish immigration to Palestine, were responsible for leaving untold numbers of Jews to perish in the Nazi ovens. And when it came to Ben-Gurion's maxim "We must assist the British in the war as if there were no White Paper, and we must resist the White Paper as if there were no war," Begin refused the complicity of the first part.

Jewish unity

This profound disagreement set the backdrop for Begin's first clash with David Ben-Gurion in 1944. After a rival underground militia,

the Lehi, assassinated Lord Moyne, Britain's resident minister, Ben-Gurion collaborated with the British to clamp down on groups not aligned with Ben-Gurion's Haganah. Begin was a top target. Irgun members were detained for months on end, some tortured, and even the children of Irgun members were expelled from Jewish schools.

Now, *hadar* meant restraint. As the Irgun was hunted, Begin implored his men to learn from Jewish history and refrain from attacking fellow Jews. In January 1945, he called a secret meeting with the Irgun's field commanders, where he was hidden behind a curtain. "Never will a Jew raise his hand to another Jew," he averred, before pulling out a single sheet of paper. "The boundary between purity and contamination is as thin as this sheet of paper," he said. "Be careful not to cross it."

This restraint would manifest itself again four years later during the *Altalena* affair. When Israeli statehood was declared in May 1948, the young nation began to integrate the various Jewish military groups into what would become the Israel Defense Forces. The process was complicated by an arms embargo imposed by the United Nations. Begin and the Irgun acquired an arms ship, the *Altalena*, and while they informed Ben-Gurion of its movements, Ben-Gurion sought to prevent the transfer of weapons to Begin's forces and ordered the ship to be fired upon. Begin urged his men not to return fire.

That evening, Begin addressed the fiasco on the radio. Weeping on air, he lamented having been branded a target by his new country's army. He was mocked by his rivals for those tears, but this was Begin's finest hour. He prevented a Jewish civil war as the Jewish state was born.

Perseverance

After Israel's victory in its War of Independence, Begin remained active in politics. The 29 years he spent in the political opposition

saved Israel from becoming a one-party state. Finally, in 1977, Israeli voters gave him and his Likud coalition a chance to govern. He had earned the trust of not only Jabotinsky's followers but also the Mizrahi Jews who formed much of Israel's working class. Far from being the fascist in waiting that Ben-Gurion and his allies insisted he was, Begin made Israel a genuine and more equal democracy, campaigning for the equal rights of Israel's Arabs and for municipal Arab autonomy.

The response to Likud's political revolution, particularly in the West, was neuralgic. In a line dripping with antisemitism, *Time* magazine observed that the name Begin "rhymes with Fagin," the Jewish villain of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. But the new prime minister confounded his critics. He began the secret negotiations with Egypt's Anwar Sadat that led to the Camp David Accords. A man who campaigned on the right of Jews to settle in the West Bank became the first Israeli prime minister to return territory it had won in a just war.

Risk-taking

Begin's greatest triumph as prime minister was Operation Opera, the code name for Israel's 1981 strike on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor. The parallels to Israel's current efforts to stop Iran's nuclear program are striking. For example, the Mossad had begun to sabotage Iraq's nuclear program as early as 1979, when it detonated a shipment of reactor equipment in France that was destined for Iraq. In 1980, Israel ordered the assassination of Yahya El Mashad, an Egyptian nuclear scientist who was working with Iraq—much like when Israel assassinated Iran's chief nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, in a daring operation in 2020.

Begin knew, however, that such steps would only delay Saddam Hussein's plans to acquire an atomic bomb. He tasked the air force with a secret mission to destroy Osirak. As today, Israel's actions led to international censure and isolation. Even the United States, under President

Ronald Reagan, voted in favor of a UN Security Council resolution that condemned the Jewish state for its aggression.

History vindicated Begin. After the U.S. military drove Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991, then Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney presented Israeli Ambassador David Ivri, who at the time of Operation Opera had been the Israeli Air Force chief of staff, with a signed satellite photo of the remains of Osirak. It said, “For General David Ivri, with thanks and appreciation for the outstanding job he did on the Iraqi Nuclear Program in 1981, which made our job much easier in Desert Storm!”



The genius of Begin is that he understood himself and his country to be links in the chain of Jewish history. Begin was proud of that history. He lived his life by a code that traced back to ancient glory even though he was born into the perils of the European continent between the great wars.

American Jews today have had the good fortune of not knowing the misery of statelessness. We have not seen the same pogroms, blood libels, and dispossession that our forebears knew. This is why the solidarity with Hamas on college campuses, the double standards when it comes to acceptable speech, the stunning rise in antisemitic attacks, and the sudden need for security at every Jewish institution and event come to many of us as a shock.

Begin would not be shocked. He understood the persistence of Jew-hatred, and how to match it with *hadar*. We should do the same. *