

# BEGIN

HIS LIFE, WORDS AND DEEDS

Zvi Harry Hurwitz



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editorials in newspapers in Israel and to the man who concluded the Camp David peace to the region. *The Washington Post* critic of Menachem Begin at various points. "In an age when so many politicians are the lightest breeze, the former Israeli Prime Minister's constancy and devotion to personal principles almost always against him, but that he did to do what he considered right for his

idea that Begin had transformed Israel in 1977 and ended the Likud block to triumph, ending the long night and shifting the balance of Israel. *Newsweek* carried a full-page article on Begin titled "The Last;" *Newsweek* similarly headed its

Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits, who had fre- quently criticized Begin's policy, said nevertheless: "I regard Begin as one of Israel's Prime Ministers – and certainly the

## Chapter 31

### BEHIND BEGIN'S RESIGNATION

MENACHEM BEGIN DID NOT WRITE HIS MEMOIRS as he had hoped to. When he spoke about it at a Herut Convention, he said: "I will write five volumes entitled *From Destruction to Redemption*." I am certain he had all of them planned in his mind. Some friends thought – *hoped* may be the more appropriate term – that he rose in the middle of the night and, unbeknownst to anyone, wrote away for a few hours. This, unfortunately, was wishful thinking.

I tried many times to persuade and encourage him to write. Yechiel Kadishai and I offered to come to him daily with a tape-recorder and switch it on while he talked into it. He dismissed the idea.

At one point he was absorbed in reading a big volume of Churchill-Roosevelt letters. He was intrigued by the style and language, and spent much time discussing some of the episodes. His enthusiasm gave me an idea. I assembled a set of Begin-Sadat letters (not including classified material), bound them in a file and brought them to Begin. I suggested the idea of publishing these letters as a book with a suitable introduction and appropriate footnotes. He took the file from me and began paging through it. "You see here," he said, pointing to the beginning of a Sadat letter, "this is where he started addressing me as Menachem and I

continued to call him Mr. President." I said that this would make an interesting footnote. He asked if he could keep the file for a while. "Of course," I responded; "it is your work." The next time I visited him, he looked very pleased. "I read all the letters. It is quite a story. But this is not enough for a book." My hopes were raised. "The material would make about 220 pages," I said, "and if we want to enlarge the book, we can add some of your and Sadat's speeches at your joint appearances."

Then came the usual disappointment. In a characteristic gesture, he raised both hands as if to suggest "Wait, not now," saying in Hebrew "*Yesh Z'man*" – "there is time."

Of course, we need not have asked his permission; this material had all appeared in the press. But so great was our respect for him that we would not proceed with the publication of such a volume without his consent. Above all, we wanted to involve him personally and actively in the project, in the hope that this would stimulate him to start writing chapters of his autobiography.

The fact that Begin did not leave such autobiographical writings has left the field open to journalists and commentators, most of whom knew little of Begin, to write his story, to speculate about the reasons for his resignation and seclusion, to attribute motives to him and even to put words into his mouth.

As one who knew Menachem Begin for 46 years, who as a newspaper editor followed his entire career, who published his speeches and statements every week and reproduced his articles regularly, who met him frequently and listened to him for many hours, who in the last years saw him regularly and frequently, I have my own assessment of the reasons for his resignation.

In my view, no one particular event brought on Begin's decision; it was due, rather, to the accumulation of a number of factors. In listing them I do not place them in any order of importance.

His own state of health had deteriorated after years of illness. He had become frail and listless and was eating little; I witnessed

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this when I returned from Washington to take up my new appoint-  
 ment as Advisor on Diaspora Affairs. When he told the Cabinet  
 on 28 August "I can no longer go on," he meant it quite literally; he  
 simply lacked the strength to continue the onerous duties of Prime  
 Minister of Israel, the country in which, as he used to say, "there is  
 never a dull moment." He explained this in his own words to the  
 stunned Cabinet: "You asked to know the reason for my resigna-  
 tion and I want to tell you the reason - I can go on no longer. If  
 I had any doubt whatever as to whether I can continue as Prime  
 Minister, I would have chosen to continue in my duties. But I do  
 not have even any iota of doubt. There is no possibility that I change  
 my opinion. Please, therefore, agree and let me go to the President  
 still today in order to hand in my resignation."

The death of his beloved wife, Aliza, was, as I have endeavored  
 to describe, a devastating blow. I am sure that he never recovered  
 from it and never forgave himself for having left her to go to  
 America, nor for being apart from her when she died. He often  
 spoke about her as the months and years went by. After her death,  
 he discovered more about the wonderful things she had done in  
 her quiet way for women in distress and in need, for institutions for  
 the handicapped and for underprivileged children requiring special  
 education. Also, as noted above, he had depended on her greatly in  
 practical matters. After her passing, grief and sadness settled over  
 him like a shroud, the edge of which was lifted but rarely. Hardly  
 ever did a smile light his face anymore; his expressive, penetrating  
 eyes lost much of their sparkle.

The events in Lebanon had taken their toll - the long days and  
 nights of consultation, decision and waiting. Ill as he often was,  
 he insisted on being awakened at any time of the night whenever  
 there was a military engagement with casualties among the Israeli  
 soldiers. He regarded each one as a personal loss. The Peace Now  
 group, taking advantage of Begin's sensitivity and sentimentality,  
 organized demonstrations outside his official residence, loudly

chanting slogans at all hours. After his resignation, they claimed victory in their struggle against him. I saw no evidence to justify their claim and, in fact, discussed the matter with him several times; he repeatedly refused to instruct the police to disperse the demonstrators, even if only to preserve the peace of the neighborhood.

Begin's reaction was no different from that of other world leaders in similar circumstances. At the height of the Gulf War, anti-war activists took up positions across from the White House and kept up a constant drum beat. President George Bush was seriously affected and enraged by this action, and stated bluntly: "Those damned drums are keeping me up all night" (*Newsweek*, 11 February 1991).

It has also been suggested that Begin was a helpless victim in the hands of "two ruthless generals," Sharon and Eytan. From my long association with him, I would not say that he was the sort who could be misled or have the wool pulled over his eyes. In an address to the Knesset on 29 June 1982, he spoke of the sacrifices of young men in the war:

The Jewish people can exist, with God's help, only by readiness to sacrifice on the part of our finest sons. We have paid a price - woe is me. I need not add another word. And we are unable to console the families who have lost their dear ones; only God can comfort them, and will comfort them.

We pray for the quick and complete recovery and healing of all the wounded. I visited them. I came to comfort them and they comforted me. I left with feelings that have no expression in human language. A wounded, hurting man told me just one thing - be strong and of good courage!

This is the stuff our sons are made of.

Happy is the nation that has such an army. Happy is the army commanded by a leader such as Rafal [Eytan] and happy

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is the country whose Defense Minister is Ariel Sharon. I say  
 this with all my heart and with all my power of belief. Together  
 we will stand and together we will overcome and ensure peace  
 for our people and country. And to our sons after us we will  
 leave a rule, a great rule: He who comes to destroy you, disarm  
 him in advance.

In a statement to the Knesset a year later – after his wife's death  
 and three weeks before his resignation as Prime Minister – Begin  
 said:

After all the wars which have been waged in Israel, and  
 this is the war that we had to fight in order to put an end to the  
 ceaseless attacks on the Galilee and its inhabitants, we should  
 not try to create the impression that there are those whose pain  
 is greater and those whose pain is less. I will compete with no  
 one regarding the pain felt by myself and all the Members of the  
 Knesset at the terrible and grave losses we have suffered. I can  
 only say that there are surely those who feel this pain as much  
 as we do, but no one feels the pain *more* than we do.

Israel does not want to stay in Lebanon. We want to bring  
 our boys home. But when the situation becomes difficult, must  
 there be an outcry? Was there not a war of attrition that went  
 on for three years? Didn't boys die nearly every single day? Did  
 any one of us [Likud] raise an outcry at the time?

Yes, the situation is difficult. I don't deny it. There is at  
 present a Syrian threat, though there has been a certain relax-  
 ation in the situation. Nevertheless, we must be on guard and  
 if, heaven forbid, hostilities should break out, we shall all have  
 to defend our lives, our existence and our future.

Begin flatly denied that he and the Cabinet were not aware of  
 what the military was doing. In an interview on Israeli television

on 15 June 1982, he said "The Government will keep its hand on the pulse; nothing will be done without the express decision of the Government. We did not enter Beirut because the Government had decided that we do not want to capture the city. We also did not capture the airport. We can capture both these objectives with blood losses, but we control the approach to the airport. And the same is true for the city. The Government took an explicit decision on everything."

The interviewer then observed: "You explained that the Cabinet was not confronted with accomplished facts. You might be aware that among segments of the population, there is concern or suspicion that Defense Minister Ariel Sharon dragged the Cabinet to moves which went beyond the original plan of the operation."

In reply, Menachem Begin declared:

I say to the article writers: Stuff and nonsense. Nothing of the sort. Just idle gossip of journalists who invent things. I read all the papers every day, I simply pay them no attention. They don't know what to write.

What kind of dragging? This is a functioning government. It met sometimes twice a day. All the facts were reported to it. The discussion covered every detail. A decision was taken on everything. No one dragged the Government; no one could have dragged. And why does the Defense Minister, a real veteran of combat, need to drag the Cabinet and act behind its back? Nothing of the sort. I would really like to take the opportunity to appeal to the journalists: Would you finally start writing facts? Maybe stop inventing. There was no deception, no dragging. Things were carried out in accordance with Cabinet decisions.

Both Sharon and Eytan denied that they had in any way misled the Prime Minister at the time of the war and might, therefore, have

been responsible for his re and accusations," Eytan told planning stages, the Prime intentions, including the pl the Beirut-Damascus high

"The appropriate office ment and the security cab a picture of the state of the were Premier Begin and th the fact, military operatio. Every stage of the war had

Eytan maintained that of the Lebanon War than wars.

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Eytan said he was pre Begin remonstrated with SI and the wounding of women that it was just not so – we w and children were not being it just wasn't true."

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been responsible for his resignation. "I totally deny these charges  
and accusations," Eytan told Israel Army Radio. "Even during the  
planning stages, the Prime-Minister and the Government knew our  
intentions, including the plan to close off Beirut and to advance to  
the Beirut-Damascus highway.

"The appropriate officers and I appeared before the Govern-  
ment and the security cabinet every time we were asked to give  
a picture of the state of the war, or for other reasons. At no point  
were Premier Begin and the Government asked to approve, after  
the fact, military operations that needed Government approval.  
Every stage of the war had the approval of the Government."

Eytan maintained that Begin was more involved in the course  
of the Lebanon War than other prime ministers were in other  
wars.

"Menachem Begin knew more than other prime ministers, who  
served during the time of other military operations. He was better  
informed and more involved than all of them, and he made more  
decisions than all of them. Both Begin and the entire Government  
visited the theater of battle twice."

Eytan said he was present at the cabinet meeting at which  
Begin remonstrated with Sharon over the bombardment of Beirut  
and the wounding of women and children there. "I told the premier  
that it was just not so - we were not bombarding Beirut and women  
and children were not being wounded there. It was all propaganda;  
it just wasn't true."

In the years of his retirement, Begin spoke with Sharon when  
the former Defense Minister was engaged in a widely publicized  
libel case against *Time* for its reporting of what happened in the  
Sabra and Shattila refugee camps. David Halevy, a veteran *Time*  
correspondent in Jerusalem who had been maligning Begin for  
years implied that Sharon was "indirectly responsible" for the  
massacre. After lengthy proceedings, the court - presided over by  
Judge Abraham Sofaer - found that *Time* had lied, but that it had

not been proved that it had done so with malice. No damages were awarded to Sharon, but moral victory was his.

Begin followed the proceedings, which were reported extensively, with the keenest of interest. He commented on one point or another and compared U.S. law with British and Israeli law, which do not require proof of malice in libel cases.

Begin cabled Sharon in New York: "Congratulations on your great moral victory." The next morning, Sharon called Begin by telephone from New York to thank him for his cable. He promised Begin that he would shake the hand of his chief defense attorney, Milton Gould, on behalf of Begin, and would thank him for the great efforts he had made throughout the trial.

This was one of the first occasions that *Time* was found guilty of misrepresentation. The magazine's credibility was shaken.

Two other aspects of the Lebanon situation caused Begin distress and disappointment, and ultimately might have had a bearing on his resignation. The veteran Israeli journalist, Moshe Zak, wrote in a memorial tribute to Begin that Bashir Gemayel's refusal to sign a peace treaty with Israel had left Begin dumbfounded. The two had met secretly on the night of 1 September 1982, in a military camp near Nahariya. Begin looked at the President-elect of Lebanon (less than half his age) with astonishment. "Soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces had spilled their blood to help Gemayel and his Christian Community, but when he attained his goal, he violated his promise," wrote Zak.

"Begin knew how to argue with the great ones of the world. But he lacked the words to rebuke adequately the man who had led Israel astray.

"That pain," wrote Zak, "was what led, less than a year later, to his retirement." That might have been a contributory factor, but I hardly think that it was the reason for the Prime Minister's retirement. But certainly, the refusal of the Lebanese – under Syrian

threat and intimidation – to resign was a big disappointment to Begin.

By sheer chance, I was in Jerusalem, and I revealed what might have been the cause of the resignation precisely that week. It was not until then, but could have determined what would happen on Sunday, 28 August, and had Begin not prepared to wait another fortnight before going to resign, the timing was different.

After many people had given up and decided to reconsider his resignation, Begin called the Prime Minister for a meeting. He went out the window and the slight smile in the corner of his mouth: "So, now you see. He was referring to a subject which I had been thinking for some time and had reached a decision on."

Germany's Chancellor Kohl was to arrive the next day on an official visit. Begin had previously, have to receive him, and he had to do so in his honor. He would be expected to meet at the airport and hear the Israel Anthem and "Hatikvah." As is customary, the visiting head of Government would be taken to places in Jerusalem which were in the Prime Minister's Office. Such places, which were visible from Mount Scopus, were visible from Mount Scopus.

The sight added to his pain. It was a well-known. He had articulated it clearly in the two years earlier:

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By sheer chance, I was witness to a rare moment which re-  
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 but could have determined why he made the announcement on  
 Sunday, 28 August, and had not done so a week earlier, or was not  
 prepared to wait another fortnight or a month or two. If he was  
 going to resign, the timing was significant to him.

After many people had gone into his office to appeal to him  
 to reconsider his resignation decision, I was left in the office alone  
 with the Prime Minister for a few minutes. Suddenly, he looked  
 out the window and the slightest sign of a smile appeared at the  
 corner of his mouth: “So, now this too is resolved,” he whispered.  
 He was referring to a subject that had obviously weighed on him  
 for some time and had reached a peak in that last week.

Germany's Chancellor Kohl was due to arrive in Israel the  
 next day on an official visit. As Prime Minister, Begin would, ob-  
 viously, have to receive him, meet with him and tender a dinner  
 in his honor. He would be expected to welcome the guest at the  
 airport and hear the Israel Army band play the German anthem  
 and “Hatikvah.” As is customary, the national flag of the country  
 of the visiting head of Government was displayed in a number  
 of places in Jerusalem which the guest would visit, including the  
 Prime Minister's Office. Such flags, flying side by side with the flag  
 of Israel, were visible from Menachem Begin's office.

The sight added to his pain. His attitude to Germany was well  
 known. He had articulated it clearly in an interview on Israel Radio  
 two years earlier:

I have a special attitude concerning what the Germans  
 did to our people, and this is not just a personal or a subjective

thing. I know how my mother, my father, my brother and two cousins – one four years old, one five years old – went to their deaths. My father, together with 500 Jews, walked ahead of them: He was the secretary of the community in Brest. He sang “Hatikva” with them; they sang “Ani Ma’amin,” (I believe). The Germans pushed them into the river, opened fire with machine guns from both sides and the river became red with blood. The water turned to blood. That is how they died. That is how my father died. My mother was an old woman, sick in the hospital. They summoned her and all the sick women in the hospital and slaughtered them. Perhaps others have no such experiences. I don’t deny it but I live with this, and will live with it until the day I die.

I have never forgiven the German people as a whole. I will never forgive them, because they bear collective responsibility. As long as Hitler brought victories, they hailed him! Later, when the decline began, they turned their backs a bit. I do not want to shake the hand of a German who participated in the war.

I am now Prime Minister and fulfill my official role. When Mr. Genscher, the Foreign Minister, came to me I received him and talked with him – of course, not in German. He spoke English and I spoke with him in English. I would not have spoken German with him. And if Mr. Schmidt had come to Israel, I would have met with him. Why? That is part of my official duties. But personally? I will tell you a story.

Once, when I was in Rome with my wife, we went to visit the Vatican Library. We both studied Latin, so we were reading the ancient Bible in Latin. Some couple approached us and asked (we were speaking Hebrew, of course) what language we were speaking. We said to them: “We are speaking Hebrew.”

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“We are from Israel.”

“Oh, we like you so much. We respect you so much.”

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So, I asked: "Where are you from?"

"We are from Germany."

Then I asked him, "How old are you?"

"Forty-five years old."

"Forty-five years old! Then, in the Second World War you were about 20 or 25 years old."

I did not say another thing and started to back off, plain and simple. Perhaps he took part in the murder of my father or of our little children. When I speak of my father I am speaking of all the fathers; about my mother, of all the mothers. About my two little cousins, of all the Jewish children.

Such a horror has not happened since God created men, and men created Satan... among civilized people who produced Goethe and Schiller...

Kohl canceled the visit "because of the Prime Minister's resignation," and the German flags set out to welcome him were removed.

Of course, the constant strife in the Cabinet and the difficulties in the party – in which he was subjected to unprecedented criticism – was another strain that wore him down. In his last statement to the Knesset on 21 July 1983, Begin declared that in times of national stress in political, defense, economic and social spheres, the people should unite and not be frightened by threats.

"I do not want to deny that this is a difficult hour for the nation in the political and defense spheres and in the economic and social spheres. All this is true. But I think that I can say – judging by examples given by other people and compared with the reality which existed in other days in this nation – that in a difficult hour, the people become united and did not try to build up additional difficulties within," he said.

He firmly rebuked the Opposition leader, Shimon Peres, for having tried to frighten the nation, at the same time of Likud's

election victory in 1977, darkly hinting that democracy would be liquidated in Israel. "Was it really liquidated?" he asked. "Democracy has never been more free in the State of Israel than it is in these days."

Admitting to difficulties with the Lebanese peace agreement, he said: "But if the enemy does not fulfill what is demanded of him, can the blame be put on our Cabinet, which manages things on behalf of the majority of our people, the majority in the Knesset?" Begin continued:

It is true that I presented several years ago certain national objectives, not all of which have been fulfilled. This is normal. When you were in power, was there no discrepancy between your promises and the reality which was created following those promises?

You have introduced motions to "Stop the Government half way." What sort of an Opposition motion is it, to stop the Government half way? You want to change the Government - introduce a no confidence motion. You want to go to the people - go to the people.

We have to advance, to solve the national problems, which are difficult; to try to become united, and then I hope, Mr. Speaker, that the problems on the agenda will find the positive solution, as was the case in former days.

And then, in what was to be Menachem Begin's last sentence spoken in the Knesset in which he had served since January 1949, he said: "And we shall build the State of Israel and ensure peace and security, as we believe - this is what will be, God willing."

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