

EDITOR'S NOTE

SAMUEL UNFAIR TO SAUL?

PRISONER #782783 BEFORE THE BAR OF HISTORY

You are a newlywed man who has become the political prisoner of a totalitarian regime. You have been forced to sit upright in a chair for 60 consecutive hours, too close to the wall to stretch your legs, awakened by your guards whenever they notice you have fallen asleep. You have subsequently endured extended stretches in solitary. Your sentence of 8 years at hard labor in a harsh climate is no surprise. It would amount to a death sentence for almost anyone, and you are not physically strong. Under these conditions, you are unlikely to retain very accurate memories of your interrogation.

Fortunately for you, the political situation changes: though the rest of your family has been murdered, you are reunited with your wife; ten years later, you publish a memoir of your Siberian sojourn. The intervening years have not been easy. After prison you spent several years in the underground, hunted by the government, a price on your head, in danger of betrayal by your compatriots. Though you now live in the open, you are execrated by thousands of your own nation, the people for whom you had risked your life, and you battle to maintain your position against strong, dismissive figures in the small, insignificant opposition party you ostensibly head. Your primary purpose in writing is to improve your political fortunes. Given the seemingly unavoidable, wholly understandable vagaries of memory, the urgent need to present yourself as the hero of your story, who is indomitable under abuse and an unvanquished debater against the sophisms of your interrogators, most biographers would treat your document as a self-serving politician's production, rather than as a reliable report to history. What, after all, is the likelihood of anyone checking it against the NKVD's records?

Then the Soviet Union fell, and the archives, with a few minor discrepancies, confirmed File #782783's remembered version of events. Even in his exposed and defenseless state, the young man could insist upon, and endlessly argue, the biggest, and the smallest, points. The will to recall correctly under the most adverse circumstances, reflected in his memoir, bespeaks a remarkable mental toughness; resisting the impulse

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to “re-imagine” these events with little fear of contradiction testifies to a deep streak of integrity. The history bears witness to the character of the historian. It is hard not to admire the man.

II

One of the few books the prisoner reports carrying with him when arrested, although it is not on the list of volumes the NKVD confiscated from him and quickly destroyed, was a Hebrew Bible. Forty years after his arrest and thirty years after he wrote *White Nights*, Prime Minister Menachem Begin took time off, during the 1981 election campaign, to deliver a lecture on the Bible. His thesis was that king Saul had been treated badly by the prophet Samuel.

Here is the evidence of the Bible: Samuel’s sons did not walk in his footsteps; the people asked for a king. Samuel was unhappy. Repeatedly he warns the people of the abuses of power to which monarchy is susceptible. Yet, in the face of popular clamor and looming external threat, he anoints Saul. Samuel promises to meet the new king in seven days. Saul must wait for him to arrive and offer sacrifices and then he will tell him what to do next (I Samuel 10:7-8). Samuel is late; the people become restless; Saul, on his own, proceeds to offer sacrifice, and then the prophet arrives, telling him that because he disobeyed God’s command his reign will not be permanent (I Samuel 13:8-14). A similar scene recurs after the battle with Amalek (chapter 15): Saul and the people spare Agag and the animals of Amalek against the prophet’s instructions. God informs Samuel that He regrets appointing Saul, and Samuel cries out all night in prayerful agony.

Begin assumes that Samuel’s objections to kingship contradict the law of Deuteronomy 17 about establishing monarchy. In this, he may follow Rambam, who considered the Torah passage a *mitsva*, against some rabbinic views maintained in the Geonic literature and by later authors like Abarbanel, who regarded the laws of kingship as a concession to human frailty rather than an ideal. Even according to Rambam’s view, of course, the powers of monarchy can be abused and the role of the prophet is to warn against such consequences. For Begin, however, the Torah is pro-monarchy, and, if Samuel objects, it must be because he feels personally affronted.

Interestingly, some of Begin’s assumptions and conclusions parallel those of his predecessor as Prime Minister and amateur Bible scholar David Ben-Gurion. Ben-Gurion too assumes that Deuteronomy contradicts Samuel’s attitude toward kingship, which he explains by positing that Deuteronomy was written later. Both Israeli statesmen agree that Samuel was unhappy about

relinquishing power and that, for this reason, he made things difficult for Saul and brought about his failure and rejection. In judging Samuel's actions as an expression of his psychology, they are both oblivious to the possibility that Samuel acts under divine command. They ignore the plain fact that, after Saul's failure to obey the commands concerning Amalek, it is God who directly communicates to Samuel that He has rejected the king.

Nonetheless there are characteristic differences between Ben-Gurion and Begin on this matter, as on others. Ben-Gurion states, in a matter of fact way, like one professional politician describing the ruthless tactics of a rival for power in the public arena, that Samuel, with his claim to divine authority, undermined Saul by imposing upon him difficult, detailed instructions and then pedantically holding him culpable for his inability to follow them to perfection. Begin, by contrast, is a 19th century liberal nationalist who recognizes spiritual and legal limits to executive power. He fought for judicial supremacy in opposition, and accepted judicial authority when in power. He experiences Samuel's religious authority as legitimate: for that reason, Samuel's turning away from Saul is a personal rejection. It is as if Samuel represented a governing ethos that cannot become reconciled to its replacement at the helm. It is as if Samuel were a father figure whom nothing that Saul does can satisfy.

Begin seems hurt by Samuel's lack of appreciation for Saul's success. For two reasons he deems Samuel's rejection particularly unfair: First, despite deviation from the prophet's instructions, the war had gone well; Saul was triumphant – he had gotten the job done. Secondly, as Saul points out in his defense, it was not his fault but that of the people, who were about to disperse (in chapter 13) and who took plunder (in chapter 15).

Is there any merit in the Ben-Gurion-Begin theory? Offhand it flies in the face of the simple import of the Biblical text, according to which it is not Samuel who rejected Saul but God. At the same time, without placing too much weight on the fact, it is intriguing that we do not hear God commanding Samuel to command Saul about their pre-battle rendezvous in Gilgal. It is possible that the command was the prophet's initiative: if that is the case, Saul is rebuked for violating God's word because one is obligated to obey the prophet, not because the specific command came from God. Malbim, among others, lists extenuating factors: the exigent military situation, the impatience of the people, the lateness of Samuel, that all conspired to put Saul's obedience under enormous pressure. Likewise, it is possible that the commandment to obliterate the property of Amalek (though not the temporary sparing of Agag), as part of the war, is Samuel's contribution (it is missing from Rambam's account of the halakhic duties mandated by the Torah): hence, had Samuel not issued these instructions, Saul would not have been liable for violating them.

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Samuel may have been justified in demanding high standards of compliance as a way of testing the king's faithfulness to the supremacy of divine law (in chapter 13) or to instill the purity of religious motivation in the conduct of the war against Amalek. Yet, from this point of view, he might have refrained from adding these demands, and his decision to do so, according to this analysis, was a human one, not a direct divine imperative. Samuel correctly declares to Saul that God is not man to change His mind, yet, as Alex Ozar comments, the alacrity with which he does so preempts the possibility of repentance and reconciliation. Begin, I think, is correct to observe that Samuel's grief when God rejects Saul does not exclude his own partial responsibility for Saul's failure. But none of these proposed insights provides sufficient backing for the full implications of the Ben-Gurion-Begin approach, given the role played by divine command and judgment in the Bible.

It is impossible for anyone who values Menachem Begin's lifelong commitment to the Jewish people to read Prime Minister Begin's defense of Saul without a keen sense of its autobiographical aspects. I do not mean only the palpable cry of the wounded servant of his people who, despite everything, is still disparaged and forever shunned by the entitled elites—this, after achieving the peace treaty with Egypt! More painfully, the two excuses Begin offers on Saul's behalf—that the military goal had been accomplished and that he had been unable to control the people—fatefully foreshadow the Lebanon War of 1982. Here, as you will recall, the military operation was successful, but its benefits were undermined moral flaws that had not been part of his plan, as Ariel Sharon, with whom Begin had entrusted the Defense portfolio, pressed ahead, exceeded his instructions and left Begin to confront the consequences.

Historians like Yehiam Weitz have suggested that this willingness to allow unreliable subordinates to take the initiative, and the temptation to justify mishaps of execution through rhetorical, crowd-pleasing appeals to the grand strategies behind them, recapitulate a fatal pattern in Begin's public activities, which all his political talent and application, all the iron discipline and studiousness of a lifetime, did not eradicate. To be sure, by the end of his long premiership, Begin was physically exhausted, ill, and alone. All the same, his comments on Samuel and Saul may reveal more about their author than was intended. Sincerity and integrity do not exclude rationalization.

III

The permanent impact of a statesman, perhaps even more than in other vocations, becomes clear, if at all, only in retrospect. How does Menachem

Begin stand before the bar of history, as we approach his centennial this summer, twenty-two years after his death?

Some historians have rated Begin among the most skillful practitioners of the art of the summit in the 20th century, despite his lack of prior experience, a tribute to his intense convictions and his painstaking, lifelong preparation for an unlikely role on the international stage. The peace treaty with Egypt that resulted, and that paved the way for other peace accords, has held up against the bouleversements of history and remains in effect even after the fall of the Mubarak regime. Without this breakthrough it is difficult to imagine Israel's economic progress in the past thirty years. Although Israelis are far from secure, and their nation's borders have not been fixed, although the peace between Israel and her most important neighbors is cold and anxious, and constantly threatened by terrorism, the state of affairs that Begin inaugurated with his overture to Sadat is better, and more secure, than the alternative.

Religious Jews, concerned for our own place in Israeli society and for the unity and identity of the Jewish people in Israel, have special reason to be grateful to Menachem Begin. I do not mean only, or primarily, his well-known openhanded treatment of the religious sector in his coalitions. We often forget how much the pre-state Israeli right was infested by loathing for Judaism and Jewish values. Powerful voices, among them prominent members of the first Knesset on Begin's Herut ticket, objected even to his use of the word "Jewish" (*yehudi*), insisting upon the designation "Hebrew" (*ivri*) for the New Man that integral Zionism was in the process of creating. They clashed with Begin in the early years of the state, largely due to their antagonism to religion and to Jewishness, though other factors also generated animosity within the party. Begin purged them from the movement and it is his own friendliness to religious practice and support of Jewish identity that caused these Canaanite tendencies, for the most part, to migrate to the Israeli left.

The above does not imply that rightist Zionism is uniformly pro-religion, and surely not that Judaism is inevitably aligned with the nationalist, economic, or cultural views prevalent on the Israeli right. There is an ongoing danger of secularists selectively exploiting religious-sounding themes and the external trappings of religious observance in the service of their own ideological agenda. By downplaying the prophetic rebuke of power in favor of a theology of conquest, one may end up placing political might above moral right. Or a new religious-sounding ideology may dismiss God as superfluous and accidental to "biblical religion" and eliminate Him from the revised Biblical canon, thus craftily reasserting, with less confrontational rhetoric, the frank secularist and nationalist message

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of the superseded Canaanites. But these threats are inherent in the entire enterprise of secular cultural Zionism, as far back as Ahad Haam. Overall, we are better for Begin's leadership of the right in this area.

Most impressively, Menachem Begin represents an abiding, heroic model of national brotherhood, what we call *ahavat Yisrael*. The story of the Altalena is familiar. In June 1948, during a ceasefire during Israel's war for independence, the Irgun, under Begin's command, was able to deliver a large shipment of arms. Whether the misunderstanding was honest or not, the Israeli government treated the unloading of the weapons on a Tel Aviv beach as a potential *putsch*; the army opened fire and the boat exploded. Had Begin not been dragged away, he too would have been killed. Elsewhere a civil war might have ensued, as it had, with less cause, in 1920's Ireland. It is Menachem Begin who gave the order not to fight against the constituted government of Israel. The Altalena affair pales in comparison to the hunting "seasons," a few years before, when the Hagana helped the British round up the right-wing dissidents with whom they had cooperated only a short while previously. It would have been quite understandable then if the Irgun had chosen to respond in kind to the prolonged persecution: the Jews, at that time, had no state, and the "Season" lasted weeks, not a brief afternoon. Here too Begin exhibited magnificent, restrained leadership under great provocation.

One of the Irgun's most famous exploits was the Acre prison break (May 4, 1947). As a child, I was taken to the site on a class trip. I did not find the visit itself uplifting: as far as I could tell, the building did not exude a patriotic aura simply because of what had happened there a generation before. What was memorable, because it was so puzzling, is that the building had been converted into an insane asylum, with only a small part set aside as a commemorative museum. Apparently the Ben-Gurion government was willing to go to great lengths to demean and undermine its adversaries by ensuring that the monument to their heroism was tucked away in a corner, with mental patients domiciled around it. Many protests were to be filed, many angry words exchanged, many years would pass, before this mockery was rectified. Our teacher, whose job that day was to inspire the elementary school children rather than to enlighten us, did not try to explain it. When I figured it out on my own I was filled with outrage and cynicism. This was the atmosphere in which Begin served as "His Majesty's loyal opposition" and taught his followers to bide their time and abide by election results.

Israeli political life to this day is volatile and conflict-ridden, up to and including the assassination of one of Begin's successors. At times, Begin's own language inflamed rather than restrained. Nonetheless, the example

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of his civility and public-mindedness remains a guiding light to the nation he helped found. It is fitting that Menachem Begin's version of these conflicts has been vindicated in the court of Israeli public opinion, so that he, who was so vilified for most of his life, is now arguably the most loved and admired of Israel's great 20th century leaders.

The ongoing legacy of a political leader is uncertain, even after his death. May that of Menachem Begin, who wanted so much to benefit his people, continue to be a blessing.

Further Reading:

Menachem Begin, *White Nights: The Story of a Prisoner in Russia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979)

Shemuel ve-Shaul: Ha-Navi ve-haMelekh (Kiryat Sefer, 1986), ed. David Shemesh *et. al.*

David Ben-Gurion, *Iyyunim be-Tanakh* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1969).

Amir Goldstein, *Gevura ve-Hadara: The Executed and Israeli Memory* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak ben-Zvi, 2011).

Udi Lebel, *Ha-Derekh el ha-Panthe'on: Etsel, Lehi and the Limits of Israeli Memory* (Jerusalem: Sapir, 2007).

David Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings that Shaped the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

Yehiam Weitz, *Bein Ze'ev Jabotinsky le-Menahem Begin: Essays on the Revisionist Movement* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2012).¹

¹ My thanks to Dovi Nadel, who suggested that I might want to compare Begin's lecture with Ben-Gurion's essay.

