

THE CONSTANCY OF MENAHEM BEGIN ¹⁰⁵⁶⁶²

A careful reading of some of the Prime Minister's earlier writings and speeches suggests to MEIR MERHAV that the mark of Mr.

Begin's leadership is a single-minded constancy of purpose and absolute inner certitude in his own rightness.

NO MORE THAN a tenth of today's three million Israelis were 14 to 45 years old in 1944-48, when Menahem Begin led the Irgun's revolt against the British. Even then, only a few were aware of its significance; fewer still knew the beliefs and principles, the basic values and the political concepts which guided it. No more than a handful of close associates knew Menahem Begin himself.

Time has dimmed the memory of those who knew and understood. For the rest, Begin was first the leader of the dissident underground which, at best, had a secondary role in Israel's renaissance, and, secondly, the leader of a futile opposition whose fiery oratory merited little more than small-type reporting.

As a leader, no less than as a person, he has remained an enigma for most people. No wonder, therefore, that they measure him by the yardsticks they applied to the kind of leader which they knew — the political whose principles yield to expediency, or even the statesman who ultimately bends to reality in the recognition that compromise may be the only way to pursue his long-term purpose.

No surprise, then, that each new statement of Mr. Begin's is taken as an adroit tactical move rather than as a declaration of principle, each political act as a clever feint rather than as a purposeful thrust.

Many of those who disagree with Mr. Begin's declared aims mute their opposition either because they believe that, if nothing else, the sheer weight of responsibility will make him accept that which he has no power to change, or that his colleagues in the cabinet and his partners in the coalition will moderate his positions. No harm will therefore come — so they believe — from Mr. Begin's probing for the limits of his power.

Nothing could be more erroneous; nothing could be more indicative of ignorance of the unwavering constancy with which Mr. Begin has held the same positions, in practically the same words, and for nearly the same reasons, on almost the same public issues, over a period of 30 years; and nothing could show more clearly how little the sources and quality of Mr. Begin's leadership are understood.

The leadership is genuine. However, it derives not from intellectual stature or profundity of thought, but from constancy of purpose, single-minded determination, a sense of mission and an absolute inner certitude of being right and in the right, which have characterized him throughout. This is why it is Begin and no one else who makes foreign policy in the present Government.

MR. BEGIN'S steadfastness can be illustrated even with respect to secondary issues. Thus, he spoke recently of the need to give the President more real authority. In the Knesset debate of February 18, 1949, he opposed the government's bill that defined the President's authority and proposed to give him a limited power of legislative veto.

In the same debate, Mr. Begin argued in favour of a functional government composed of eight ministries. The number of ministries should not be subject to considerations of party politics, he said. He also demanded that it be established by law that the seat of government would be in Jerusalem, irrespective of the practical constraints that existed at the time. For, as he said on June 15, 1949, "not every political declaration is a

declamation. There are statements which are political acts."

But these are minor matters. When it comes to the central issue of our time, Mr. Begin made his most important statements in the Knesset debate on the Rhodes armistice agreements in April, 1949, and in the foreign policy debate in June, 1949. To put those statements into perspective, here is a paragraph from Mr. Begin's foreword to the 1972 edition of his book, *The Revolt*, in which he quotes his radio broadcast of May 15, 1948:

"The homeland is historically and geographically an entity. Whoever fails to recognize our right to the entire homeland, does not recognize our right to any of its territories. We shall never yield our natural and eternal right...When the day arrives, we shall materialize it..."

On April 4, 1949, Mr. Begin called for a vote of no confidence in Ben-Gurion's government, for having signed an armistice with, and thereby recognizing, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and thus giving up to its king, "the slave of the British," "a vast area in the western part of the homeland." Referring to the mutual defence treaty between Britain and Abdullah, and heaping scorn on the government, Mr. Begin said:

"We have achieved nothing through peaceful ways. You, who sit on the green chairs, have deluded yourselves into believing that if you agree to the partition of Eretz Israel, you will get the State of Israel peacefully...Is it also written there [in the UN partition plan — M.M.] that the British will have their guns positioned at the same distance where they will be according to this agreement?" And turning to the Religious Front members in the House, he said:

"Gentlemen, I want to ask you on your conscience...how did your hand not tremble...[when you signed] a plan which implies...abandoning the Jordan...to the enemy...[and giving] official recognition to the rule of Abdullah over the Old City in Jerusalem?"

BUT NOT ONLY Mr. Begin has remained constant. In the generation that has gone by since he said these things, there have been vast changes in Israel's reality, within and without. Yet the basic dilemmas have remained the same, and so have the conflicting answers to the problems. Note, for example, Ben-Gurion's reply in that debate to his opponents, who then also included Mapam:

"A Jewish state in existing reality, even only in western Eretz Israel [that is, without Transjordan — M.M.] is impossible if it is to be democratic, for the Arabs in western Eretz Israel outnumber the Jews...Do you want to have, in 1949...a Jewish state in the whole of Eretz Israel and...[should] we drive out the Arabs [to accomplish this], or do you want to have democracy in that state? How then will it be a Jewish state? We want a Jewish state, even if it is not in the whole of the country..."

The minor changes that have to be made to restate this argument in terms of our own times are obvious. Of course Mr. Begin never accepted, and does not accept today, the premises, the analysis and the policy conclusions of his opponents. In *The Revolt* he encapsulates his attitude towards the Arabs:

"Partition will not ensure peace in our country. From the Arabs' point of view there are two possibilities only: either they will want, and be able, to rise in arms against Jewish

rule, or they will not. In the first case they will fight even against a partition state. In the second case they would not fight against Jewish rule even in the whole country."

And in the foreign policy debate of June 15, 1949, Begin said: "...Peace does not depend on signing peace treaties. Peace between us and the Arab States depends mainly, and perhaps only, on the military, economic, territorial and strategic power relations which will be set up between us and them."

He scorns Ben-Gurion's choice between democracy and Jewishness, and simply denies the relevance of the demographic facts: "We — a minority in Eretz Yisrael? If we accept that assumption, then there are many parts of Eretz Israel which should not have been included in her boundaries...Such an argument cuts the ground from under everything on which we based...our link with the homeland."

For Mr. Begin, nationhood, sovereignty, the very existence of a nation are not a matter of mere empirical fact. They are the reflection of ideas, of the "supremacy of moral forces," of historical rights, of sacred faith, of legal claim and, above all, of the proof of fire and steel. A nation exists insofar as it is willing and able to fight for its existence. "We fight, therefore we are."

THAT LESSON is the result of the forces which shaped Begin's worldview and, in particular, his conception of Zionism.

Mr. Begin's outlook is that of the Polish Jew whom anti-Semitism, powerful enough to hurt and too weak to crush his pride, goaded into Zionist rebellion. It is that of the generation which saw the lofty ideals of a Woodrow Wilson and a Tomas Masaryk go up in the flames of World War II. The collapse of that world left him with a Treblinka complex. The world is against us, at best indifferent. Our very existence is constantly in danger.

Many Israelis share this catastrophic conception of Zionism, but Mr. Begin is its epitome. In *The Revolt* he says: "Just as 'the world' does not pity the thousands of cattle led to the slaughter-pens in the Chicago abattoirs, equally it did not pity...the tens of thousands of human beings taken like sheep in Treblinka. The world does not pity the slaughtered. It only respects those who fight."

Nothing has changed in that attitude, which also explains how he views the Palestinians. They — indeed the Arabs in general and the PLO in particular — are out to destroy Israel. They are Hitler in a new guise. The PLO's Covenant is a new *Mein Kampf*: Nothing they say or do can persuade Begin that they want peace. And nothing that we can offer them will do away with that eternal enmity. The only answer to anyone out to exterminate the Jewish people is resistance. Only those who fight can expect to establish and maintain their rights.

And the right of the Jewish people to Eretz Yisrael is not only an absolute moral and historical right, it is also grounded in international law — and it is exclusive. Today, it also includes the right of possession which, to the jurist, is nine-tenths of the law.

ON TOP OF all this, Mr. Begin, the leader of the Irgun, cannot but hold the PLO in utter contempt. The record of the revolt he led — a record ignored by contemporary history —

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