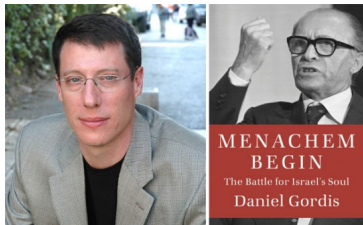


Begin biography moving, not convincing

Written by Dr. Michael Berenbaum

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Daniel Gordis

In his new biography, “Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel’s Soul” (New York: Next Book, Schocken), Daniel Gordis writes passionately and poignantly about the life of former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, from childhood in Brisk (now Brest-Litovsk) to the post of prime minister of Israel. Along the way, Begin escaped from the Nazis, was tortured by the Soviets and hunted by the British in Palestine. Because of his role in the pre-state battles among Zionists, he was ignored by the Israeli establishment and suffered multiple electoral defeats before becoming Israel’s first non-Labor prime minister. He made peace with Egypt and attacked the nuclear reactor in Iraq, securing Israel and the West from Iraqi nuclear terror. He was undone by the 1982 War in Lebanon and unraveled by the death of his beloved wife, Aliza. His journey from hunted “terrorist” to Nobel Peace Prize winner is the stuff of legend, and Gordis skillfully capitalizes on it.

Gordis believes that Begin’s biography is also the story of Israel’s struggle for its Jewish soul. He portrays Begin as the first Israeli prime minister who, while not observant, was at home in Jewish tradition and spoke from the perspective of Jewish history. His predecessors and successors were estranged from Jewish religious life and had revolted against the exilic Jewish ethos. He forgets that Levi Eshkol, Begin’s predecessor by more than a decade, was regarded as so Jewish in humor and demeanor that the Israelis virtually insisted a *sabra* be appointed defense minister on the eve of the Six-Day War. Moshe Dayan became its hero, not Eshkol, who had built the army that won the war.

Begin’s Judaism, Gordis writes, was both particularistic and universalistic. Using the traditional

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values of Jewish teachings and historic experience, he extended those values to all people. "Passionate concern for the welfare of the Jewish people did not have to come at the expense of compassion for human beings everywhere." One must laud such Jews, especially in a world where some Jews celebrate universal values yet are alienated, if not embarrassed, by today's expressions of Jewish values; and in which there are Jews who act as if Jewish values have no universal import or application beyond the Jewish community. I am moved by Jews who take the Begin approach, and moved by Gordis' portrayal of that Judaism, but no matter how moved I am, I am also not persuaded by this book.

To bolster his case for Begin, Gordis demeans Begin's archrival, David Ben-Gurion, presenting a revisionist history of Israel's struggle for independence. I will leave it to others who have written on Israel's early history to assess the relative contributions of the Haganah, Etzel and the Stern Gang to Israel's creation. Gordis' primary criticism of Ben-Gurion seems to be that he was pragmatic — a term Gordis repeats to excess — and willing to compromise in order to achieve his goal, unlike Begin, whose Jewish idealism and Zionist integrity caused him to oppose the 1937 partition effort, an accommodation with the British. Only toward the end of the book does the reader learn that Ben-Gurion's efforts were essential to the establishment of the Jewish state.

Nowhere here do we learn about the two enduring streams in Zionist thought: those who felt its primary goal was the establishment of a Jewish state, an all-essential homeland for the Jewish people, and those who insisted that the return to the land of Israel was Zionism's primary goal. Ben-Gurion led the effort to achieve statehood and understood partition was necessary. Even Golda Meir, who voted against the 1937 partition plan, said wistfully, "I am happy that it did not fail on my account."

Twenty-five years ago, I did an oral history with Robert Nathan, an economist who helped invent the concept of Gross National Product while working for Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He told me how he spent 1944, at the height of the war years — during one of the deadliest periods of the Holocaust — in Palestine. For two uninterrupted hours, early every morning before Ben-Gurion began his arduous workday, Nathan would work with the head of the Yishuv on the economic blueprint for the Jewish state. But Gordis shamefully repeats a cheap shot from Begin's successor, Yitzhak Shamir, once a Stern Gang leader: "Ben-Gurion needed Etzel to remind him that it wasn't enough to want a Jewish state, one had to do something in order to achieve it." One expects a biographer to evaluate such a statement and not just reiterate it.

Gordis recounts the clash between Ben-Gurion and Begin over the Altalena, the Irgun ship bringing arms to Israel. He rightfully lauds Begin for avoiding civil war and castigates Ben

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Gurion for duplicity — but nowhere does he consider that a state must have the monopoly on the use of military force in order to effectuate its policies. (Israel was a state by then.) Today, rogue forces in the Middle East undermine state policies in country after country, so one wonders why Gordis hasn't even a minimal appreciation for Ben-Gurion's assertion of state power.

When Ben-Gurion does act, as in the 1956 Sinai invasion, Gordis credits Begin's mentor, Ze'ev Jabotinsky. "Ben Gurion had ultimately come to realize that Jabotinsky was largely right when he understood that only force would convince Arabs that Israel was meant to survive." One wonders if Gordis consulted Ben-Gurion's extensive writings or merely came to this conclusion because it fit his own ideological predilections.

Gordis has a deep appreciation for Jewish values and for Jewish precedents, such as when, in the early 1950s, Begin opposed Israel entering into discussions with Germany regarding reparations, invoking the statement, "Remember what Amalek did to you," and the genocidal weight of that command. Begin demonstrated against reparations in Zion Square and stormed the Knesset. But even while I know he was protesting out of Jewish anger and anguish — an anger and anguish I share today, 68 years after the defeat of Nazi Germany — hasn't it been demonstrated that, however controversial, allowing Germany a way back into the family of nations was a wise policy decision? And that Ben-Gurion, who had to build an infrastructure for his new state and homes for new immigrants, needed to find a pragmatic way to survive?

There is no doubt that Begin intensified Israel's consciousness of the Holocaust, but he may have also soured many Israelis on his form of remembrance. In order to credit Begin, Gordis completely omits mention of the Eichmann trial under Ben-Gurion and how it opened the doors to Holocaust testimonies and commemoration — in Israel and the world over. He never mentions how Begin saw the invasion of Lebanon as an attempt to rescue Christians who were being murdered by Muslims, because he saw the Israeli presence in Beirut as an example of what the world should have done to save Jews, seemingly confusing Beirut with Berlin. He also neglects to mention that Begin wanted to abolish Yom HaShoah and move Holocaust remembrance to Tisha B' Av to "normalize" the Holocaust rather than stress its uniqueness in Jewish history.

The most Gordis can say about the war in Lebanon is that it was not a war of choice — it was the first war whose necessity was debatable. A biographer cannot merely quote a disciple defending his master; he should grapple with the historical record.

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I take issue with Gordis' treatment of the Holocaust because it is uninformed by scholarship, merely by rhetoric.

Begin said: "Without readiness for self-sacrifice, there will be another Auschwitz." Auschwitz did not occur because of the absence of self-sacrifice. To justify the invocation of Auschwitz regarding the retreat to the borders of 1967, Gordis invokes the authority of Abba Eban, a dove who said many wise things, yet failed to appreciate the foolishness in his statement that a "withdrawal to the borders of '67 is a withdrawal to the borders of Auschwitz." Eban and all the others who have followed rhetorical excess are guilty of Holocaust trivialization. How many tanks did Jews have at Auschwitz? How many troops? Today, Israel is armed — more capable and more likely to bomb Iran than Iran is to bomb Israel — hardly an Auschwitz scenario.

Gordis also gives Begin more credit for rescuing Soviet Jewry than the historians of the movement do. When Soviet Jews wanted to come to the United States, there was an authentic clash of values: Basic human values lived in tension with important Zionist values. In the United States, the Soviet Jewry struggle was portrayed as a human rights struggle, and many Jews came to believe that allowing Jews to live in freedom was a Jewish human rights issue. Naturally, Zionists — and I number myself among them — wanted Soviet Jews to go to Israel, but if they did not, Jewish values mandated that we help Jews live in freedom. Gordis is nasty in his comments, such as, "The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and particularly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) had a vested interest in allowing Soviet émigrés to head to the United States. ... The 1960s Soviet Jewish immigration provided them with a new focus." The JDC was heroic in its work in communist Eastern Europe, and HIAS had helped Jews come to these shores for more than a century, bringing Jews from oppression to freedom. That was their mandate, their vested interest.

Despite Begin's universal values, nowhere does Gordis portray him thinking of the Arabs living in the land of Israel except as a minority in a Jewish state. Nowhere does he consider the demographic issues. How does Israel remain a Jewish and democratic state with a large Arab population, perhaps even a majority? Gordis argues, "The mere question [of Arab rights to the land] raised the issue of whether or not Jews had the right to the land of Israel. For Begin the belief was axiomatic. Without that belief what justification was there for the Zionist enterprise in the first place?" Many of us would challenge that assertion; Gordis does not.

As a biographer, Gordis fails to tell his readers that Begin reached power only after he faced death. He had a massive heart attack in 1977, before his election. His political power rose just as his personal health deteriorated, and there were long periods of time when those close to him wondered if he had the capacity to carry out the office. At points, he could not lift a pencil

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or follow a conversation. He was heavily medicated from 1977 onward, throughout his time in office. Even then, the disciples in his inner circle felt that Begin, in failing health, was better qualified than they to lead the nation. As a political commentator, Gordis neglects to mention that the Labor Party lost the 1977 election because it was repudiated. Begin's share of the electorate increased slightly, and Labor's lost votes went to Yigael Yadin and his new splinter party.

Another important omission: Gordis quotes Begin's response to Sabra and Shatila: "Goyim kill goyim and they hang a Jewish child." Begin forgot that, this time, Jews were in charge; we were actors in history who bore the historic responsibilities of those in power. Gordis does not recount the titan clash over Jewish values — Jewish values, not Israeli values — when the Kahan Commission Report established the principle of "indirect responsibility" based on a biblical teaching of the beheaded heifer offered by the elders of a city when a person was found dead outside the city limits as interpreted by the rabbis, commented upon by Rashi and tested by the norms of Jewish history. They brought to life the responsibility of those who wielded power when events got out of hand.

To top it all off, Gordis' epilogue is profoundly disturbing. He draws parallels between the American and the Zionist revolutions and writes in seeming bewilderment: "The reputation of Israeli revolutionaries, despite their similarity to those in America two centuries earlier, has borne the brunt of the international community's displeasure."

Gordis may not realize that many Americans are rightfully ashamed of our record with regard to Native Americans, their displacement from their lands and the abrogation of treaty after treaty. Some in my field consider our treatment of the Native Americans as genocide, albeit unintentional genocide. When the Republicans opened the last Congress with a reading of the Constitution, they were too embarrassed to read it in its entirety: They skipped the three-fifths compromise that regarded a slave as three-fifths of a person. Israel's accusers regard the Zionist revolution as 20th-century colonialism. It is astonishing to hear this coming from one of Israel's most ardent defenders.

Begin deserved better; so, too, Gordis — a skilled writer and a passionate Jew who wants Jewish values to speak to the universal condition of all people. We have every right to expect more from Gordis — much more.

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