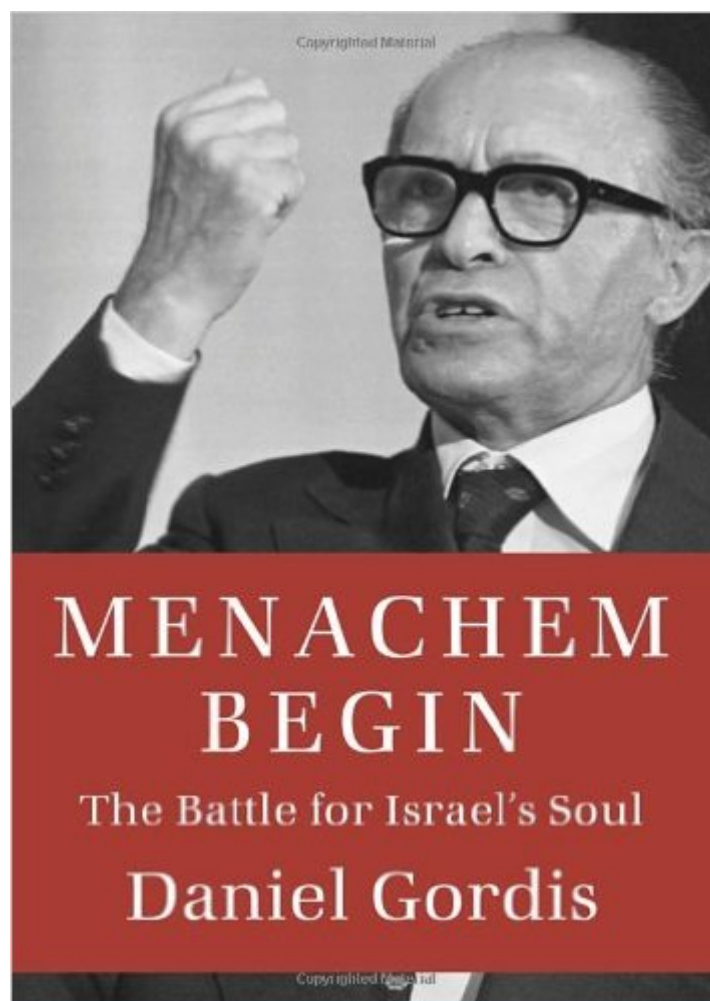


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Menachem Begin: The Battle For Israel's Soul (Jewish Encounters Series)



Synopsis

Reviled as a fascist by his great rival Ben-Gurion, venerated by Israel's underclass, the first Israeli to win the Nobel Peace Prize, a proud Jew but not a conventionally religious one, Menachem Begin was both complex and controversial. Born in Poland in 1913, Begin was a youthful admirer of the Revisionist Zionist Ze'ev Jabotinsky and soon became a leader within Jabotinsky's Betar movement. A powerful orator and mesmerizing public figure, Begin was imprisoned by the Soviets in 1940, joined the Free Polish Army in 1942, and arrived in Palestine as a Polish soldier shortly thereafter. Joining the underground paramilitary Irgun in 1943, he achieved instant notoriety for the organization's bombings of British military installations and other violent acts. Intentionally left out of the new Israeli government, Begin's right-leaning Herut political party became a fixture of the opposition to the Labor-dominated governments of Ben-Gurion and his successors, until the surprising parliamentary victory of his political coalition in 1977 made him prime minister.

Welcoming Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to Israel and cosigning a peace treaty with him on the White House lawn in 1979, Begin accomplished what his predecessors could not. His outreach to Ethiopian Jews and Vietnamese boat people was universally admired, and his decision to bomb Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981 is now regarded as an act of courageous foresight. But the disastrous invasion of Lebanon to end the PLO's shelling of Israel's northern cities, combined with his declining health and the death of his wife, led Begin to resign in 1983. He spent the next nine years in virtual seclusion, until his death in 1992. Begin was buried not alongside Israel's prime ministers, but alongside the Irgun comrades who died in the struggle to create the Jewish national home to which he had devoted his life. Daniel Gordis's perceptive biography gives us new insight into a remarkable political figure whose influence continues to be felt both within Israel and throughout the world. This title is part of the Jewish Encounters series.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The history of Israel has largely been written from a secular Labor-Zionist or a Palestinian perspective. In those histories Menachem Begin has either been air-brushed out or vilified as a terrorist by Jew and Arab alike. Daniel Gordis a rabbi from a family of rabbis and vice president of Shalem College in Israel makes a huge contribution in correcting the historical record. Simply put, although Menachem Begin was not the George Washington of Israel, he certainly was a founding father and was it not for him the State of Israel might not have been brought into being. Begin was born in 1913 in the town of Brisk (now Brest in Belarus) under grey Polish skies compared to the sunny Mediterranean skies most of the early Zionist leadership who were either born in then Palestine or arrived there when very young. As a result Begin stood out as Polish formal compared to Israeli casual. Begin did not arrive in Palestine until he was 30. As an aside his birth was midwived by Ariel Sharon's grandmother. Begin learned his Zionism from his father and the everyday Polish anti-Semitism he witnessed while growing up. He also, unlike the Zionists in Palestine, grows up religious and very knowledgeable in the biblical texts. In time he would become, according to Gordis, the most Jewish of Israeli prime ministers. As a teenager he became a convert to the Revisionist Zionism of the charismatic Vladimir Jabotinsky and quickly became a leader of its Betar youth group. Revisionist Zionism differed from Labor Zionism in that it was more clear-eyed about the fate of the Jews, in Europe, market oriented versus socialist, and was pessimistic about the prospect of peaceful coexistence with the Arab population living in Palestine.

For some time now, I have been an avid reader of publications of Dr. Daniel Gordis, Senior Vice President and the Koret Distinguished Fellow at Shalem College in Jerusalem. Dr Gordis' recent publication "Menachem Begin: The Battle for Israel's

Soul", http://www..com/gp/product/0805243127/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0805243127&linkCode=as2&tag=danielgordis-20, although essentially a biography of Menachem Begin, reads like an exciting adventure, facilitating rapid reading. Gordis' writing style is flowing, at once concise, lyrical, and often poetical, as he recounts the life of Israel's first Likud Prime Minister, clearly one of Gordis' heroes of the State of Israel. The book also serves

as a detailed history of the State of Israel and is heavily referenced, often with direct quotations. The quotations of Begin's addresses capture the essence of Begin's oratorical skills, often sending chills down this reader's spine. The text further provides convincing refutation of many of the terrorist allegations often ascribed to Begin in connection with E.G. bombing of the King David Hotel; hanging of British officers; the Altalena affair. Begin's devotion to Jewish values, to the Jewish People, and to the State of Israel is well captured by the Pentateuchal quotations Gordis provides in the headings of each chapter. Numerous examples of Begin's traditional 'Jewishness' abound. In one instance, Begin urged that on recapture of the Old City, the Israeli cabinet accompanied by the two Chief Rabbis go to the Western Wall to recite the 'Shehechyanu'.

“The state begins in violence. However lofty the ideals of a new country or a new regime, if it encounters opposition, as most new regimes and countries do, it must fight. If it loses, its ideals join the long catalogue of unfulfilled aspirations.” •Richard Brookhiser wrote those words at the outset of Founding Father, his study of George Washington. I thought of them often as I read Menachem Begin, Daniel Gordis's new book on the life and character of Israel's sixth prime minister. The history of few states has been attended by such perpetual violence as has that of Israel. Its founding Zionist ideal was a response to anti-Semitic violence, at least in part. (The other part was the millennia-long Jewish hope of return to Jerusalem.) Its independence was gained through terrorism against the British Mandate and battles with invading Arab armies. Its history has been beset by life-and-death wars against neighboring Arab countries, not to mention constant conflict with Palestinians. And then there are the fractious relationships among Israelis. (“Two Israelis, three political parties” is a joke I heard decades ago.) The name Israel means “one who wrestles with God,” but the wrestling has been with humans too. Menachem Begin participated in many of those struggles. He was born on August 16, 1913, in Brest-Litovsk, Poland, to Zionist parents. At age 13, he embraced the distinctive Revisionist Zionism of Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, who advocated the establishment of the Jewish State in Israel “by force, if necessary. He entered his twenties with the Nazis taking power in Germany, and fled Poland after Germany invaded on September 1, 1939. He would eventually lose his parents and brothers in the Holocaust.

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