

Menachem Begin at 70

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the state of his health, on the frequency of his public appearances and his capacity to govern. Few leaders have been written off as frequently as Begin. Virtually from the day he took office some publications, including rather important ones, were predicting his retirement or collapse or even his demise within a matter of weeks, months or at most a year or two. In the event, he has confounded his detractors and defied the "experts" to whom he must appear as something of a medical miracle. Like Mark Twain who cabled the Associated Press from Europe, Begin might well say: "The report of my death was an exaggeration."

He has now entered his seventh year as Prime Minister of Israel which makes him one of the longest, continuous serving heads of government among Western, democratic nations. Incidentally, he is the only person other than David Ben-Gurion to have been reelected for a second term to the highest executive office in Israel. Menachem Begin has served as a member of the Knesset (Parliament) from the first election in the independent state of Israel in 1949 through to the present time. He was a Minister in the governments of National Unity under Prime Ministers Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir, and now heads the government. Thus he has served for 9 years in office and 26 years in opposition.

When asked what he regards as the most significant events in his life he points unhesitatingly to his years as commander of the Irgun Zvai Leumi which played a major role in freeing his country from British mandatory rule (a pre-condition for the creation of the State of Israel) and the influence he was able to exercise during the Six-Day War to liberate Jerusalem from Jordanian occupation.

What manner of man is Menachem Begin?

I write as one who has known and observed him for almost 40 years; who has studied his policies and reported extensively on every facet of his career. His life has been characterized by completely selfless devotion to his nation, by struggle, hardship and personal denial. Those who have worked with him or have negotiated with him, know that he can be very tough on matters of principle or honor and flexible on subjects not considered essential to Israel's Security. A man of great compassion and consideration he can be very sentimental about family and friends. During the last difficult year I saw him relax once for a few short moments and enjoy

paging through several bound volumes of documents that he had received that day from the Polish authorities. The great "treasure" he held in his hands was his family's full school records. His eyes moistened as he spoke of his brother's and sister's scholastic attainments and, in modesty, he pointed out that in his own case the volume contained numerous requests he had written to the academic authorities for the waiving of fees that he simply could not pay. In fact, there were times when he went hungry and pursued his law studies only by earning a pittance from giving extra tutoring in Latin.

He has always remembered his poor student days and devoted the full sum of the Nobel Peace Prize, which he shared with Anwar Sadat, to the establishment of the Aliza and Menachem Begin Nobel Peace Prize Fund to assist poor students. Each year 36 scholarships are awarded to students recommended by the country's universities. Only one condition is attached to the award -- that each beneficiary student must, in turn, tutor a young child from a poor neighborhood. Three years ago I attended the ceremony at which the first 36 students -- each accompanied by his or her adopted pupil -- filed past the Begin family to receive their awards.

Consistent with this concern for the poor and disadvantaged, Menachem Begin urged his cabinet colleagues early in their term to enlarge the compulsory free education system so as to include all children from the kindergarten to matriculation. With the same motivation he launched the idea of Project Renewal which aims at uplifting the poor of the nation by rebuilding and refurbishing their overcrowded and overburdened areas.

Externally, Menachem Begin's most remarkable achievement as Prime Minister is, of course, the peace treaty with Egypt for which he and Anwar Sadat gained the acclaim and respect of the enlightened world and received the Nobel Prize. Now, under his leadership, Israel has terminated the state of war with a second neighbor, Lebanon.

The autonomy plan that is part of the Camp David Accords was originally proposed by Menachem Begin who remains completely devoted to its principles and ultimate implementation. In April of this year when Israel celebrated her 35th Independence Day he declared in a message to his nation:

"Now we wish to move ahead speedily to consummate the other part of the Camp David Accords, namely the negotiations of the full autonomy for the Palestinian Arab inhabitants in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza District. We want those negotiations renewed. There are proposals, positions, and plans but there exists only

one single document of an international character that is binding, and that is the Camp David Agreement signed by Israel and Egypt and witnessed by the United States. Just as we remained true, to the date and the dot, to the one part of Camp David - the peace treaty with Egypt - so shall we remain true to the other at the heart of which lies the autonomy program. Its negotiation and realization is the key to the further advancement of the process of peace to which Israel is firmly committed."

Security has been the principle concern of every one of Israel's six Prime Ministers who took all measures necessary to frustrate and prevent the designs of those seeking to harm or destroy the State. Hence, when it was established beyond a doubt that a potential atomic threat to the Jewish state was being developed in Iraq, Menachem Begin and his government ordered an attack on that reactor. Subsequently, as a result of Israel's tenacious drive against the PLO in Lebanon, it now appears that the world's most extensive and dangerous terror organization has been immobilized and thrown into disarray.

What is Menachem Begin's vision of the future? From many long discussions I have had with him I am certain that his most ardent hope is that there will be no more war between Israel and her Arab neighbors and that the peace process will be extended to include his country's other immediate neighbors as well. Unfailingly he calls on the President of Syria and the King of Jordan to join Israel in negotiations without any preconditions.

He longs for a united nation and an end to the artificial divisions between Jews of Sephardi and Ashkenazi origin. All of them constitute the Israel nation and he is confident that with the passage of time this too will be accomplished.

As one who was imprisoned by the Soviet authorities for his Zionist faith and as one of the initiators of the campaign to bring the Jews of the Soviet Union to Israel, he prays that many of them will yet come home and that parallel with this there will be substantially increased voluntary immigration to the Jewish state from the Western world.

At this important milestone in a full life of service and accomplishment, Menachem Begin derives most satisfaction from the growing Jewish presence in Judea and Samaria. It is tangible expression of his philosophy proclaiming the inalienable right of the Jew to live in every part of the Land of Israel. His vision of the future is contained in these words I heard him address recently to a U.S. Congressional delegation: "Jews and Arabs will live together here in mutual respect, in equality of rights and in peace."

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