

WASHINGTON DATELINE

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Begin, Reagan & The First Anniversary Of Aliza Begin's Death

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Now that Menachem Begin has stepped down as Israel's sixth prime minister, his resignation has heightened talk that he is seriously ill, and had been unfit to carry out his responsibilities. But Mr. Begin had maintained for some time that he would resign when he reached 70; and he reached that milestone on August 16.

True to his word, he stepped down. True also that Begin appears to be in a depressed, even melancholy mood - not unexpected after some 50 years of intense activity and stress, climaxed last November by the death of his wife, Aliza. They were married for 43 years and extremely close to each other.

In addition to reaching the 70 mark, Begin's decision to resign was based on personal reasons. Although he is in seclusion, he is not incapacitated. He does have a rash on his face which prevents him from shaving, but he is now gaining both strength and weight. He plans to use his remaining energy to write a new book. To be entitled "From Destruction To Redemption," it will cover the period from the Holocaust to the establishment of the State of Israel.

When word of resignation first surfaced, Begin's age was compared to Ronald Reagan's. (The President is two and one half years older). "Yes," Begin quipped, "but President Reagan is a hearty and robust individual."

While Begin was perceived as being combative in his relations with Reagan, Begin sees himself as a sincere friend to Reagan and to the United States. He has respect and empathy for America and what it stands for. His vocabulary is often punctuated with the words 'freedom,' 'liberty,' and 'independence.'

Recalling the controversy surrounding the Reagan Administration's decision to sell Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) radar planes and F-15 enhancements to Saudi Arabia in 1981, Begin described the issue as a "serious dispute" that generated unsympathetic debate. He said he particularly regretted the use by supporters of the AWACS sale of the slogan, "Begin or Reagan."

"I am not in competition with President Reagan," Begin told me at that time. "The slogan is bitter and hurtful. It was meant, I think, to force American Jews and millions of Christian friends to choose between loyalty to the president of the United States and support for the prime minister of Israel."

"Nevertheless, President Reagan understood my point of view and I understood his. I regard the President as a devoted friend of Israel who appreciates our Nation as a bulwark of freedom in the Mideast."

During an interview in 1981, President Reagan told me: "When I explained to Mr. Begin why we

wanted to go through with the AWACS sale and detailed our reasons, he was not upset by what we were doing. Nonetheless, he said he would maintain his position. Then we discussed our relationship with Israel. And when Mr. Begin departed the White House, he said he had the best understanding with us -- an understanding he never had had before."

Last November, when Begin cancelled a White House meeting with President Reagan, it was because of the sudden death of his wife. Just prior to addressing a Council of Jewish Federations dinner in Los Angeles, Begin was startled by the tragic news. His grief was compounded by regret and anguish at not being at her bedside in Jerusalem.

When he cancelled a White House meeting with Reagan last July 27, the press speculated that Begin didn't want to face Reagan because of the crisis in Lebanon or because of the construction of new Jewish settlements on the West Bank. However, Begin's duties were so demanding he felt he couldn't justify the trip at that time. He reasoned that the U.S. and Israel saw eye to eye on most of the issues, including Lebanon. Still, he might have made the trip had he been able to travel only to Washington. He was "not up to" the peripheral sessions his supporters had planned for him and felt obliged to accommodate them if he journeyed to the U.S.A.

Menachem Begin and Ronald Reagan developed a good, personal relationship and remain respectful of each other. They have had frequent, warm communications. When differences did occur, the President telephoned Begin directly. Yet, while Begin preferred to speak for himself, Reagan allowed aides to speak on his behalf. That often engendered misconceptions about their relationship, giving the illusion that it was deteriorating.

For example when a White House aide had described Reagan as "furious with Begin" because of policies, it was the aide himself who was the "furious" one. When an aide had put out the word that Reagan was "pressuring" Begin, that too represented what the aide thought was presidential policy, when in fact it was not.

At times, aides would even plant stories about "the President's outrage" at Begin so as to manipulate policy or statements, and thereby apply pressure on Begin. Only in two instances was Reagan apparently upset with Begin. The first was as a result of Begin's luncheon with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the 1981 AWACS controversy when Reagan's White House aides erroneously convinced the President that Begin abused U.S. hospitality by attacking Reagan's decision on AWACS. The second occurred in the summer of 1982 when the President telephoned Begin to ask him to stop the bombing in Beirut.

One headline after another cried out about the "feuding" of Reagan and Begin until the story last year had it that President Reagan was attempting to overthrow the Begin government. Perhaps that was the intention of Reagan aides, but it was not Reagan's idea or his ambition.

Moreover, Reagan rejected the notion that his 1982 Mideast Peace Plan was designed, in part, to oust Begin. "I emphatically deny that," Reagan told me at the time. "I just don't believe

in intervening in the internal affairs of any other nation."

Now, a year later, Begin has ousted himself, and Reagan applauds the former Prime Minister: "His statesmanship and leadership have been a source of inspiration. He has shown the courage and determination to make the kind of difficult decision for peace, as demonstrated at Camp David, decisions which are so necessary to bring stability to a troubled region."

Menachem Begin was elected to the premiership on May 17 -- and sworn in on June 20 -- 1977. He has been a dominating figure in Jewish history for some 40 years, first as the leader of the underground Irgun forces in Palestine, then as leader of the parliamentary opposition, and for the last six years as prime minister. He has been a shrewd, charismatic and brilliant statesman on the international scene.

Supporters and critics alike have admonished, yet have respected him. He took exceptional risks for peace, and was hailed for an unprecedented break-through when he invited Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem in 1977. For their roles in the Camp David Accords, Begin and Sadat were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. And when Begin visited Sadat in Egypt, he became the first Israeli prime minister to travel to an Arab country in quest of peace.

Because of his strong sense of purpose, Begin was accused of treating too lightly other people's interests and objectives. He had been preoccupied with his own Nation and feared that his incumbency might result in Israel's being left in a less than favorable strategic position than existed when he entered office. Furthermore, he was obsessed with the fact that he couldn't afford to squander the vital interests of Israel; and concerned that 'Camp David' could ultimately do that.

Begin has been branded as militant, inflexible and difficult; but close friends describe him as gentle, sensitive and compassionate.

Even while he was accused of being a hard-liner, stubborn and intransigent, Begin returned all of the Sinai to Egypt, including the air bases Israel had built and the oil wells Israel had dug, in exchange for a peace treaty. In signing that treaty, Begin ordered the dismantling of Israeli settlements, particularly the town of Yamid, which he maintained would never be given up. But give it up he did -- for peace.

Begin's passionate belief that Judea and Samaria -- the West Bank territories -- must never again fall into Arab hands was at the root of some of his difficulties with American foreign policy makers. But he remained steadfast in his determination that settlements in that region must continue to be constructed and he was adamant that external Israeli control is essential for his country's security.

At Camp David, Begin had disputed President Jimmy Carter's statement that he (Begin) had promised to freeze further settlement activity for a period of time during the autonomy negotiations. He denied he agreed to a freeze during the autonomy negotiations, but did agree to one during the Egyptian-Israeli peace negotiations. When that freeze expired in December, 1978, he stepped up the settlements

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