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Menachem Begin's Legacy

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Tetzavei - Zachor

Menachem Begin's Legacy

These days, the Yahrtzeit of Menachem Begin is commemorated in Israel.

In the United States, people remember Mr. Begin for signing a peace treaty with Egypt or for the man who destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor.

But in Israel, they remember him in an entirely different way.

The State of Israel was established primarily by Ashkenazi Jews who made aliyah to the Holy Land in the 1920s and 1930s. They "dried the swamps"—they established the famous Kibbutzim and fought for the establishment of the state. The leaders of these Jewish outposts were Jews who came "from Minsk and Pinsk." Only in the 1950s did Jews start coming from Yemen, North Africa, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria.

But when they got to the Holy Land, the Ashkenazim were the hosts and the bosses, while the emigrants from these Middle Eastern communities were "the new kids on the block." The activists accepted these Olim and worked with them, but they did not relate to them as equals or peers.

The same thing happened in American history. In the U.S., many of the first Jews to settle in America were from Germany—and in America they did quite well. But when the first major wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in the 19th Century from Russia and Poland, the German Jews still helped them acclimate—but at the same time, the German Jews were embarrassed by them and

called them “greenhorns” or “greeners” and all sorts of other derogatory phrases.

And that’s what happened in Israel. The Ashkenazi “natives” looked down at the “new Olim”—as a result of which two classes formed in Israeli society. The Ashkenazim, who saw themselves as more educated, were also more economically stable, while next to them there rose up a “second Israel” comprised of those who had lived in the transit camps for new immigrants and in neighborhoods blighted by shameful poverty and frightful misery.

Obviously, this gave rise to estrangement and resentment between the two groups—between the ruling class that had in it almost not a single Sephardic Jew and the Middle Eastern community that felt robbed, and rightfully so.

Into this whole mess stepped Menachem Begin. He had always drawn close and cherished members of the Middle Eastern community. He loved them and went to visit them and speak to them in the camps and development towns. He would speak to them with eye contact, as an equal. He didn’t raise himself above them. He loved them unconditionally, and they responded in kind. He simply loved every Jew.

When he would appear at events, they would sing, “*Begin, melech Yisrael, chai v’kayam!*” And indeed, when he was elected as Prime Minister, he appointed members of the Middle Eastern community to important positions. He appointed them as ministers and restored the personal dignity that had been so sorely lacking.

During his second election campaign, there was a political rally of the opposing Labor Party in Tel Aviv at which a comedian got up and said that Begin’s Likud Party was where all the “chachchachim” could be found.

That word is an insulting slur against Middle Eastern Jews, which translates to “bums” or worse.

The comedian went on to say that the chachchachim never fought in Israel's wars, while here in this public square we have the real commanders and fighters.

The very next day, in the same square, a rally of the Likud Party was held, at which Menachem Begin appeared. He began by saying that just yesterday, it was said here that the Likud is full of chachchachim who are not among those who fought for the land.

He then said, "I'd like to tell that comedian who the real warriors are."

He took the crowd back 30 years to the days of the British Mandate before 1948, when the British Empire ruled the Holy Land and were always on the side of the Arabs. During that time, underground resistance organizations were formed whose goal it was to kick the British out of Israel. This they accomplished using terror tactics—they blew up British Army outposts, attacked offices of the British government, and so on.

Of course, the British authorities relentlessly pursued members of the underground. Many young Jewish men were arrested, with a number of them receiving death sentences and sent up to the gallows for death by hanging.

Begin, who had been the commander during that time of the resistance group called Etzel, an acronym for "Irgun TzvaiLeumi" (National Military Organization) or "Irgun" for short, repeated in his speech the story of two young men, one named Moshe Barzani and the other Meir Feinstein. One was from Iraq and the other from Lithuania. They were both arrested by the British and sentenced to death.

One day, they were told that the following morning, they'd be taken out to be hanged. But they had resolved several days before that that they'd rather die by their own hands than give the British the opportunity to kill them.

Their friends somehow managed to sneak two grenades into the prison, and that night, several hours before they were said to be taken out to be killed, they hugged one another... with the grenades between them. The next morning they were buried on the Mount of Olives.

In his speech, Begin noted that here you had one Ashkenazi and one Sephardi who both fought together for the people and the land. European, Iraqi—it didn't matter. They were both Jews, brothers, warriors.....

And indeed, at the end of his days, Begin asked to be buried not on Mt. Herzl, where all of Israel's Prime Ministers are buried but specifically on the Mount of Olives, next to those two victims of the British regime, one of whom was Ashkenazi and the other Sephardi.

This week, we continue reading about the building of the Mishkan.

When they built the Mishkan, Moshe Rabbeinu was instructed to take up three collections. One collection was one in which everyone gave the same half-shekel: "The rich shall not increase and the poor shall not decrease." Those coins were melted down and cast into the sockets for the walls of the Mishkan. These were the foundation blocks that held the Mishkan together—and when it came to that, G-d wanted everyone to be equal.

After that, another half-shekel was collected from every Jew. But this was an annual donation with which to fund the sacrifices regularly offered up in the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple over the course of the entire year. And with this, too, G-d wanted everyone to be equal—to feel that they had equal ownership in the daily sacrifice that was brought twice every day.

And during the Temple Era, this half-shekel would be collected every year during the month of Adar.

But after all was said and done, they still needed to build the Mishkan—and to build the Mishkan, they needed a real

collection. It's very nice and beautiful that everyone was equal—but you can't build a Mishkan with half-shekels, even with a lot of half-shekels.

And so G-d ordered the great fundraiser that we read about last week in the Torah portion of Terumah—in which G-d commands, "And take for me a donation from every man whose heart moves him to donate shall you take My donation." Meaning, everyone should give what they can.

And so there was a great awakening in the Jewish Nation at that time. Within two days, people had donated everything that was needed for the Mishkan—to such an extent that we read in the Torah portion of Vayakhel that Moshe ordered an announcement to be made in the camp that no more donations be brought.

But this brings up a question: In every group of people, there's always the richer people and the people who have a little less. There are those who donate gold and those who donate bronze. Thus, a situation of inequality was created—and we might even say that there were those who felt less connected to, and less wanted in, the Mishkan, and less important in G-d's eyes, because they had donated less to the Mishkan.

And so to counteract this feeling, G-d appointed two men who to be responsible for the entire Mishkan construction project. One was Betzalel, the great nephew of Moshe Rabbeinu and a member of the high society, from the most prominent family in all the Nation of Israel. And together with him there was appointed someone from the Tribe of Dan.

Even within the Jewish Nation (as in every social group), the nature of people was (and is) such that not everyone finds themselves at the same social standing. For example, the Tribe of Levi—"oh, they're the Kohanim and the Levi'im!" And the Tribe of Yehudah was the tribe of royalty, and they clearly felt more important than the other Tribes.

Not only that, but Yaakov Avinu himself, had not one but four wives—the two sisters Rochel and Leah and the two maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah. And right from the get-go, the children of Leah belittled the children of the maidservants, and Yosef couldn't take it. That fact was one of the reasons for the great rift between Yosef and his brothers. As Rashi(Bereishis 37:2) puts it, "He was a lad among the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah... because his brothers would embarrass them and he would embrace them."

But in our current Parshah, Moshe Rabbeinu—at G-d's instruction—appoints to the Mishkan project one Ahaliav benAchisamach of the Tribe of Dan, as a representative of the "second class citizens," as Rashi says: "Ahaliav was from the Tribe of Dan—of the downtrodden of the Tribes, of the sons of the maidservants; and G-d equated him to Betzalel for the work of the Mishkan.

Which brings us to the upcoming holiday of Purim.

The custom is that on the eve of Purim, three half-dollars are donated to charity as a remembrance of the mitzvah of the half-shekel. And so I'd like to invite everyone to come to shul a little earlier before the reading of the Megillah. We'll have plenty of half-dollar coins here for everyone, and everyone who wants will have the chance to keep the "Machtzis HaShekel" custom.

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