

Menachem Begin's *Zionist Legacy*

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What Carter Owes Begin

Michael Doran

Former President Jimmy Carter arrived in Israel on March 8, 1983, five years after the signing of the Israel-Egypt peace agreement at Camp David. It was Carter's first visit to the country since leaving the White House. "I'm looking forward to my conversations with Prime Minister Begin," he said upon arrival at Ben-Gurion Airport. "I particularly want to pay my tribute to him ... as a man who is searching for peace, and who has exhibited great courage in the past to move the first steps toward a comprehensive peace." On the surface the statement sounded deferential, but for those who had followed Carter closely over the years, his disappointment with Menachem Begin was no secret. Between the lines, Carter was saying that, whatever good things Begin had done "in the past," he was a major stumbling block in the present.

In *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (2007), Carter records his recollections of the visit, making it clear that he arrived with the intention of doing battle. When he and Begin met alone, Carter offered a few token words of praise, and then launched

into a sharp critique of Israel's current policies. He also raised the most divisive issue between the two men: his accusation that Begin had welshed on a personal commitment, supposedly made during the Camp David summit, to halt Israeli settlement building in the West Bank. Begin sat at the table with his eyes averted. When the former president paused for a moment, Begin offered a short, perfunctory rebuttal and then brought the meeting to a polite but abrupt close.

And thus ended the partnership that produced the greatest diplomatic achievement in the history of Arab-Israeli peacemaking.

Someone else standing in Carter's shoes might have conducted himself differently. He might have left current policy disputes to the sitting American president, downplayed past disagreements, and focused on celebrating the shared achievement of the Camp David Accords. After all, his main focus now was on safeguarding his legacy, and whatever qualms he had about Begin, Camp David had wrapped their legacies together like hair in a braid. A different kind of politician might have seen praising Begin as a savvy way of elevating himself, and might even have gone so far as to pay elaborate tribute to Begin's courage, vision, and leadership—to, in a word, his greatness.

But Carter was Carter, and he came to hector Begin, not to praise him. Why?

A piece of the answer lies in Carter's personal disposition. Fate might have shackled him to the Israeli leader, but he had no inclination to play the role of Begin's partner. Not that he aspired to be an enemy, either. Perhaps he saw himself instead as Begin's prophetic conscience.

Through the Year with Jimmy Carter (2011), a book of prayers and daily devotions, brings this self-image into focus.

A strong identification with the prophet Jeremiah, who receives some three dozen mentions, runs through the text. “Imagine,” Carter writes, “that ... God named you to be heaven’s mouthpiece, not only to your own wicked people, but also to the nations of the world. How would you react? That was Jeremiah’s dilemma.”

And Carter’s too, it would seem. In his role as heaven’s mouthpiece, Carter singles out Menachem Begin for divine disfavor. Begin, Carter laments in this same book, referred “to Palestinians as ‘terrorists’ every time we spoke. Every Palestinian was a terrorist.... The dehumanizing of someone by the use of a pejorative word is a sinful thing.”

Jeremiah was the prophet of Jerusalem’s destruction. He advised King Zedekiah to avoid war with Babylon: “I said, ‘Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live.’” But the obdurate king rejected the prophet’s advice, and as a result left Jerusalem vulnerable to attack by Nebuchadnezzar.

Carter, it seems, cast Begin as his Zedekiah, and in *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* he delivers his farewell address in the role of Jeremiah. There, Carter labors to portray the March 1983 meeting with Begin as an encounter between prophet and king, omitting any detail that might detract from the symbolism. Readers do not learn, for example, that Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former national security adviser, had published his White House memoir on the eve of Carter’s arrival in Israel, revealing that Carter held Begin in such low regard as to refer to him on one occasion as “a psycho.” If readers of *Peace Not Apartheid* knew of the pall this threw over Carter’s visit, they might have sympathized with the Israeli prime minister’s decision to cut short his rendezvous with heaven’s mouthpiece.

For the same reason, presumably, Carter's book omits any mention of Begin's personal circumstances. In the spring of 1983, the prime minister was anything but an obdurate king. He was a man in agony. Aliza, his wife, had died four months earlier. That blow, compounded by the controversies of the Lebanon war, had thrown him into a deep depression. Soon after his meeting with Carter, Begin resigned from office and retreated into seclusion. Carter sifts those facts out of the story, one assumes, because Jeremiah remonstrates with the mighty; he doesn't kick a man when he's down.

But Carter's idiosyncratic political imagination is only the starting point for understanding his inability to praise Begin. The deeper explanation lies in the attitude of his administration more generally—an attitude that can only be described as hostile. Brzezinski's memoir, for example, casually lists Begin together with some of the most reviled figures of the day. In a passage criticizing Cyrus Vance, Carter's secretary of state, for being allergic to the use of force, Brzezinski laments that this soft streak "tends to be exploited by the Qaddafis, Khomeinis, or even the Brezhnevs or Begins of our age."

Begin, then, belonged in the adversary column. Why? The usual answer—the pat answer—emphasizes his ideology. According to Samuel Lewis, then the American ambassador in Tel Aviv, Begin was "regarded as a total disaster by the American government. Few knew him, and the ones who did thought of him as a terrorist." To be sure, as a former leader of the Irgun, a defender of Greater Israel, and opponent of Palestinian statehood, Begin espoused ideological views that officials in the Carter administration found repugnant. But the plain fact is that the Israeli-American relationship plummeted the moment

Carter took office in January 1977—that is, five months before Begin ever came to power.

Relations with the government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who would lose to Begin in late May of that year, had been nothing short of abysmal. “The Carter-Rabin talks in early March went badly,” writes Cyrus Vance in his memoirs. “The chemistry between Carter and Rabin was poor, and the two appeared to grate on each other’s nerves.” Brzezinski’s memoirs concur in this assessment, and Carter himself writes in his diary that Rabin was “one of the most ineffective persons I’ve ever met.”

In 1977, then, any conceivable Israeli leader from the mainstream parties was destined to run afoul of Carter—due to *his* ideology.

Two words sum up Carter’s core beliefs on the Middle East: comprehensive peace. In sharp contrast to Presidents Nixon and Ford, Carter rejected such interim solutions as the Sinai disengagement agreements that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had painstakingly negotiated after the 1973 war. Such projects were small ball, the thinking went, and also inherently unstable. In the Arab-Israeli arena, everything was connected to everything else, so it was necessary to solve the entire conflict all at once, by means of a grand, multilateral forum. It was Kissinger who had first convened such a conference in Geneva in 1973, but he had used it primarily to legitimate his personal diplomacy. Now it had to be revamped and revitalized—and, in a key point for Carter, it had to be co-chaired by the Soviet Union.

For the Israelis, the American intention to give the Soviets a central role in the diplomacy was disturbing enough; even more troubling was Carter’s conviction that the Palestinian question was the center of gravity in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Carter believed, in essence, that Israeli suppression of Palestinian nationalism was the core problem to be solved. The entire Carter team, moreover, was imbued with an unshakable certainty that all of the Arab states bordering Israel, including Syria, stood ready for peace—provided, that is, they could be assured that Israel would return to the 1949 armistice lines and that the Palestinians would receive a homeland.

For the sake of convenience we might call this perspective the honest-broker paradigm. Carter and his team saw the political landscape of the Middle East as divided between, on one side, the Arabs as a bloc, and, on the other, Israel. The United States was caught in the middle—a position that gave it no choice but to mediate between the two sides with an eye to reaching an understanding with the Arabs—by, naturally, forcing Israel to compromise.

On November 19, 1977, Anwar Sadat flew to Jerusalem and, before the Knesset, delivered his message of “no more war, no more bloodshed.” The event stunned the Carter administration. Nothing in its intellectual makeup allowed it to comprehend why an Arab leader would jump into the loving embrace of Menachem Begin. To the administration, the Arab world reacted to Israel as a single organism—an organism, moreover, that engaged with the United States and the Soviet Union according to Arab-Israel dynamics. Thus, hardline Israeli governments pushed the Arab organism toward Moscow; a conciliatory government pulled it back toward Washington.

With this mechanistic picture in its head, Washington was completely unequipped to make sense of Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem. That Menachem Begin would open up a secret bilateral channel with the leader of the most influential Arab country, that he would do so without the assistance of the United States,

and that this channel would deliver the greatest breakthrough in the history of Arab-Israeli peacemaking—these facts were, according to the core assumptions of the honest-broker paradigm, utterly inconceivable.

As it grappled with the gap between its own beliefs and reality, the Carter team was thrown into an emotionally conflicted state. On the one hand, Begin and Sadat had offered the administration something beautiful, vibrant, and alluring. On the other hand, what they were offering was also the embodiment of everything that the administration vehemently opposed on principle. The new dynamic was a bilateral negotiating channel—it was, that is to say, a kind of supercharged Kissingerian process: Sinai disengagement on steroids. What Begin and Sadat had cooked up was, therefore, utterly beguiling but inherently sinful.

The Carter administration felt like a pious man besotted with a beautiful prostitute. Finding the Egyptian-Israeli negotiating track irresistible, it embraced it warmly. At the same time, however, the administration found it impossible to shake off associated feelings of guilt and displaced resentment. The administration, in effect, would congratulate itself on its wild nights with its unlikely paramour, yet blame her for the shame it felt on the morning after.

The blame began immediately—the moment Sadat announced his visit to Jerusalem.

The story is briefly told, and it begins a little over a month before Sadat's initiative, when a severe controversy erupted over Carter's decision to bring the Soviets into the planned Geneva conference. The world learned of this new partnership suddenly and without warning on October 1, 1977, with the release of a joint Soviet-American communiqué. The document elicited

a storm of outrage, especially from Israel and its American supporters, who complained, among other things, about the communiqué's support for "Palestinian rights." This phrase, combined with the fact that the Soviets would be co-chairing the conference, generated a fear in Israel that a plan was afoot to impose a settlement by rolling the Israelis out of the West Bank and establishing a Palestinian political entity there.

The storm was very damaging to the administration on Capitol Hill, so Carter took steps to calm it down—steps that included a meeting in New York with Moshe Dayan, the Israeli foreign minister. During a long and rancorous encounter, Dayan mounted a spirited offensive, threatening, in effect, to whip up Jewish opposition to Carter, both in the United States and in Israel, unless Carter agreed to issue a joint US-Israeli memorandum of understanding pledging American opposition to the creation of an independent West Bank. While Carter did not concede on that precise point, he did agree to a joint statement of principles. In short, he capitulated, and he did so publicly.

The brazen behavior of Dayan—and behind him Begin—enraged both Carter and his team. At their meeting, Carter told Dayan "that, of all the nations with whom we had negotiated on the Middle East, Israel was by far the most obstinate and difficult." As for his staff, while it shared his anger at Israel, it was also deeply disappointed with Carter himself for giving in to what Brzezinski would refer to as Dayan's "blackmail" and thereby "increasing skepticism among the Arabs as to the likelihood of Geneva producing any constructive result." Brzezinski's opinion was widely shared. Thus, on the eve of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem the Carter administration had convinced itself that Menachem Begin—Begin alone, and not Sadat—had killed Geneva.

But, of course, Anwar Sadat fully shared the Israelis' distaste for Geneva. Not only was Carter bringing the Soviets into the diplomacy as equals, but he also aspired to involve Moscow's clients, Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This grand plan was the stuff of Sadat's worst nightmares. The Egyptian leader saw no reason why, when his two goals were to reclaim the Sinai and move Egypt into the American sphere, he should be locked in a room with the Soviets and Syrians, who would bar the door whenever he sought to talk to the Israelis and Americans alone. Sadat went to Jerusalem, therefore, to scuttle Geneva.

His calculations, however, were inscrutable to Carter and his staff, convinced as they were that their commitment to a comprehensive solution had won them accolades in all Arab capitals, including Cairo. The only conclusion they could draw was that Egypt had turned its back on Geneva because Begin had killed it. "[I]t was Carter's apparent inability to stand up to Israeli pressure," writes William Quandt, then on the National Security Council staff, "that seems to have convinced Sadat to strike out on his own."

The logical contradictions in this viewpoint are obvious. If Sadat was happy with the Geneva framework, why would he create a new bilateral framework? If he feared the Israelis had excessive influence over Carter, why would he conclude he was better off sitting alone with Begin? But the argument was less an effort to explain than to explain away Sadat's rejection of Geneva, to insulate the core belief system of the administration from facts showing it to be out of touch with reality.

Menachem Begin was instrumental in delivering to Washington the greatest breakthrough in the history of Arab-Israeli peacemaking, and the Carter administration would never forgive him for it.

Sadat's gambit eventually forced Washington to scrap the cumbersome and unworkable Geneva conference, but the Americans never abandoned their Geneva mindset. Even as they supported the bilateral Egyptian-Israeli track, they remained wedded, emotionally and intellectually, to the goal of comprehensive peace and Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. In public, Brzezinski began speaking of what he called "a 'concentric circles' approach, building on the Egyptian-Israeli accord, then expanding the circle by including the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza as well as the Jordanians, and finally moving to a still wider circle by engaging the Syrians and perhaps even the Soviets in a comprehensive settlement."

In fact, the concentric circles were a giant labyrinth, and Carter and his team inevitably got lost along the way. Grossly miscalculating, they judged all of the positive developments that emerged from Sadat's visit to Israel, up to and including the Camp David Accords themselves, against the utterly unrealizable standard of a comprehensive peace.

Carter's reactions to Sadat's visit are a case in point. On November 17, two days before Sadat arrived in Israel, Carter notes that "Begin called, extremely excited about Sadat's visit; complimentary of me. I pointed out the necessity for him to help Sadat, particularly with other Arab leaders, by not letting it be an Israeli-Egyptian negotiation involving the Sinai." But, of course, Begin disappointed Carter, and thereafter this extreme disappointment accompanied every stage of the negotiations down to the signing of the Camp David Accords. Begin as Carter portrays him was stubborn, belligerent, pettifogging, sermonizing, prone to interrupt, hostile to Palestinian nationalism, protective of Israeli settlements—he was all of these unpleasant things and many more. And standing behind each specific complaint and investing it with deep meaning is Carter's core indictment: Begin

and Begin alone was preventing the Americans from achieving their cherished goal of a comprehensive peace.

Carter never held the army of Arab leaders who refused to join the Camp David negotiations—Hafez al-Assad, King Fahd, Yasir Arafat, Saddam Hussein, King Hussein, and others—responsible for their own actions. Carter never regarded the opposition to Zionism in Arab political culture as a primary obstacle to a comprehensive peace. The Arabs were not staying away; Begin's "extremism" was driving them away.

Carter's passionate belief in this fanciful proposition generated the great myth of the Camp David summit, namely, that Begin welshed on a promise to freeze all settlement in the West Bank. In his memoirs, Carter writes that on Day Twelve of the summit, Begin agreed "that no new Israeli settlements would be established." However, he "later denied that he had agreed to this, and claimed that he had promised to stop building settlements only for a three-month period." Cyrus Vance, Carter notes, supported the president's accusation.

But others who were present in the room did not agree with Carter, and common sense dictates that they, not the president, are telling the more accurate story.

Begin simply had no incentive to make such a concession. The peace agreement with Egypt was a done deal by the time Carter put the screws to him. The demand for a freeze, moreover, was coming exclusively from the president. Carter himself admits that "Sadat was not particularly interested" in the issue. What Sadat did care about deeply was the question of settlements *in the Sinai*. After a long and painful negotiation, Begin finally agreed to uproot those settlements, thus clinching the deal with the Egyptians, who thereafter became mere spectators to the Carter-Begin drama.

Carter asks us to believe that Begin, after fully satisfying Sadat's painful demand on Sinai settlements, then turned around and made a similarly far-reaching concession on West Bank settlements—without, moreover, kicking and screaming and rending his garments. This flexible, easygoing Begin was the same Begin whom Carter incessantly depicts as litigious and recalcitrant; the same man who was ideologically committed to West Bank settlement and passionately opposed to Palestinian nationalism. The picture is simply impossible to believe.

In any case, on the following day, the last day of the summit, Begin passed to Carter a draft text covering his understanding of what the two men had agreed upon regarding the West Bank question. If there had indeed been a temporary misunderstanding between them, Begin thus clarified his position less than twenty-four hours after their discussion. In subsequent years, however, Carter would repeatedly depict this as a stab in the back, an accusation that he would hurl at Begin on March 8, 1983 like a criminal prosecutor charging a defendant.

The kerfuffle at Camp David took on an exaggerated significance in Carter's mind because the call for a settlement freeze was his last, desperate chance to realize his dream of yoking the Egyptian-Israeli agreement to a comprehensive peace—*his* dream, not Assad's, not King Hussein's, not King Fahd's, not Arafat's, and certainly not Anwar Sadat's. Indeed, when Carter queried the Egyptian leader for suggestions about ways to “help him with the Palestinians or the Arabs,” Sadat responded with serene lack of interest. “He said,” Carter records in his diary, “the only thing he wanted was not to aggravate the Jews.” A few days after the summit, Sadat reinforced the point, sending Carter a message saying “not to worry about reaction from other Arab leaders; he was not worried about it.”

The advice fell on deaf ears.

When Carter arrived in Israel on March 8, 1983, he claimed he was paying tribute to Menachem Begin, but, instead, he denigrated the Israeli leader at his moment of greatest personal weakness. If, however, anyone was truly *deserving* of tribute from Carter, it was Begin—for his indispensable role in moving Egypt out of the Soviet sphere and into the American security system, for stabilizing the eastern Mediterranean, and for carrying out the greatest diplomatic coup in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. For all of that, Begin deserved deep and undying gratitude from the United States, and he also deserved the unqualified personal gratitude of Carter for helping to deliver the president's only foreign-policy triumph.

By praising the achievements of Begin here and now, we therefore take the first steps toward righting a personal injustice that Carter and his advisers have done to the Israeli prime minister. At the same time, we also help ourselves. The peace process that continues to this day was born when Zbigniew Brzezinski developed his concept of concentric circles. With the hindsight of three-and-a-half decades, it is now obvious that the dreams of the Carter administration regarding a comprehensive peace were just that—dreams. They were the fantasies of intelligent people lost in an elaborate maze of their own ideas. Although the gap between dream and reality has narrowed over the years, it has not disappeared. If we are to read the challenges of the present clearly, we must first shed the delusions of the past. Praising Menachem Begin is a good place to start.