

The quintessential Jew remembered, By Yehuda Avner

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It was Tuesday, June 21, 1977, Menachem Begin's first day in the prime minister's office, and I had been unexpectedly summoned into his presence.

He glanced up sharply through his thick, black-rimmed spectacles. He seemed dwarfed somewhat by the gigantic mahogany desk behind which he sat.

The signs of a recent heart attack were still upon him. His face was sallow, his cheekbones pronounced, his semi-bald crown thrown into prominence. Yet he was impeccably neat and imperious, like a patrician, a man to be addressed by title, not by name.

In a voice so formal it sounded like an official pronouncement, he declared, "I have this day received a letter of invitation to Washington from the president of the United States of America, Mr. Jimmy Carter, and I wish you to look over it with a view to preparing a reply."

Taken aback, all I could do was to sit up with the ramrod posture of a new recruit, nod, and croak for permission to retire in order to draft a response, as was my wont with his predecessors. But he, in a tone that was just a shade supercilious, said there was no need for that any more. He wrote his own English letters and speeches. What he needed was someone to touch them up for him.

"I will prepare the reply, and you will Shakespearize it," he said with a good and encouraging smile. And then, in English, by way of explanation. "Polish my Polish English. Stylize it. Give it a touch of Shakespeare." The telephone buzzed.

The prime minister had two telephones on his desk, one cream-colored - a regular line with press buttons - and the second a red point-to-point military set, linked directly to the defense people in Tel Aviv. He stared at the buzzing red mechanism as if he had an aversion to it. Tightening his lips, he delicately picked up the receiver and gravely said, "Hello?"

It was Ezer Weizman, his new defense minister. From what was being said I gathered that there had been two PLO Katyusha attacks from southern Lebanon into northern Israel, albeit with no casualties or damage. Also, overnight, Muslim militia had assaulted a Christian Maronite village in northern Lebanon, slaughtering civilians.

Austerely, his expression pained, the prime minister said into the phone that the PLO attack might well be a deliberate test of his will on this, his first day in office. He, therefore, suggested a commensurate response.

"And as for the Muslim attack on the Christians," he added in a tone that was sharp, stubborn, and dogged, "the policy of our new government is clear. It is our moral duty as a Jewish state to come to the aid of the Lebanese Christian minority.

"We shall come to the aid of any persecuted minority in the Middle East. The Christian world has abandoned the Maronites. We shall not abandon them."

I sat dumbfounded. Begin had just turned Israel's Lebanese doctrine on its head. Yitzhak Rabin, his predecessor, never permitted Israeli forces to become so directly entangled in the Lebanese bloodbath for fear of being sucked into its infernal civil war.

I was still searching for something to say when Begin's eyes focused on the door through which Yechiel Kadishai, his closest aide and confidante, had just popped his head to announce that Reb Raphael was on the line.

"Put him on," said the prime minister slouching back in his chair, crossing his legs, and cuddling his cream receiver to his ear. "Aha, Reb Raphael, how are you?" he purred with fond intimacy. "I have been thinking much of your dear father of blessed memory on this day. We shall remain faithful to his legacy of Eretz Yisrael, I promise you."

Reb Raphael was a name I knew. His late father was the widely adored and saintly Reb Aryeh Levine, a legend in his lifetime. When the British ruled Palestine, Reb Aryeh toiled to render aid and comfort to captured Etzel fighters, many of whom were condemned to long terms of imprisonment. Some were sentenced to death and hanged. Their last embrace at the foot of the gallows was Reb Aryeh's. Now his son ran the small Jerusalem yeshiva which his father had founded.

The prime minister inquired about the yeshiva's welfare, and as he listened his features became compassionate. "Azoy," he sighed. "I'm so sorry to hear things are so difficult. I shall speak to one or two friends to help.

Meanwhile, send the electricity, water, and telephone bills to Yechiel. I shall see to them personally. It's a mitzva I want to do." And then, pumping encouragement back into his voice he reassured Reb Raphael that all would be well.

"Don't fret. Your task is to sit and learn and teach. We shall see to the rest," he said.

WITH LEBANON on the boil, I found this benevolent t te- -t te between an obscure yeshiva head and the prime minister of Israel astounding. But this, clearly, was the man's m tier.

He spent the next few minutes briefing Kadishai about Reb Raphael's plight and asked him to get hold of a certain Sir Isaac Wolfson in London. (The most important thing about Sir Isaac Wolfson was that he was a very rich Jew).

He now began to muse out loud about what he would reply to president Carter, when his cream phone buzzed once more and his eyebrows rose in pleasure upon answering it. "Sir Isaac!" he boomed. "How glad I am to have found you."

Begin listened intently to what Sir Isaac was saying, and in an English that was accented but perfect responded by thanking him profusely for his expressions of good will. Then, with a roguish glint in the eye, he asked,

"So tell me, Sir Isaac, the British press, do they have a good word to say about me on my first day in office? Or am I still their favorite fiend?" Whatever Sir Isaac's answer was it wiped the impish look from the premier's face. Little by little it darkened into displeasure. He clucked his tongue, wagged his head, and in a tone huffy with disdain, shot back, "So The Times is at it again, preaching Middle East appeasement just as it preached German appeasement in the Thirties.

"That's the newspaper, remember, which dismissed the atrocities of Hitler's Brownshirts as mere 'revolutionary exuberance.' Bah! What do they want of me now? Another Munich? Give up Judea and Samaria like Neville Chamberlain forced Czechoslovakia to give up the Sudentland? What are we supposed to do, commit suicide like Czechoslovakia?"

Sir Isaac reported other things that made Begin plainly upset. In a tone of resignation, he lamented, "So there are people who still think of me as the ex-terrorist, eh? After all these years they are still blinded by their prejudices.

"But you know the truth, Sir Isaac. You know we were never terrorists." Abruptly, he rose to his feet, his shoulders squared, his voice stiffened: "We were freedom fighters. We fought bravely fair and square, man-to-man, soldier-to-soldier, against the British. Never did we deliberately hurt civilians.

"And you tell me there are still people there in Britain who call me a terrorist and Yasser Arafat a freedom fighter? I have nothing but contempt for them."

His tone went suddenly raw: "That so-called Palestine Liberation Organization - 'Liberation,' bah! - that murderous Nazi organization led by

that war criminal Yasser Arafat, they target civilians exclusively - children, women, and men.

"So I say to you, Sir Isaac: Justice will win the day!"

He trumpeted this final sentence like a peroration of an oration at a rally. And having thus let off steam, he lowered himself back into his chair, and in an unruffled, winning fashion spent the next few minutes expanding on the actual purpose of his call. This he wrapped up with an appeal that came from the bottom of his heart:

"Sir Isaac, I would not be troubling you now did I not sincerely believe that saving Reb Raphael's yeshiva is a mitzva - a sacred and noble deed. And, knowing your generosity, I thought you might want to have a share in it."

The philanthropist's response was so generous it brought a blush of pleasure to the prime minister's cheeks. Over and over again he cooed into the telephone, "Thank you. Thank you."

Had a stranger happened to overhear how Menachem Begin opened his heart to Reb Raphael and to Sir Isaac Wolfson, he might have gone away thinking that a prime minister's job in Jerusalem was some sort of yeshiva drive punctuated by affairs of state. Just to watch him handle, in one and the same breath, and with equal zeal, a presidential letter from the White House, a military flare-up in Lebanon and a yeshiva appeal in Jerusalem, was a heady and spellbinding experience.

For the first time the Jewish state had at its head a prime minister who was a companion of the old school. No other premier before - or since - has possessed his cozy acknowledgement of God, his deep reverence for the Jewish heritage, his innate sense of Jewish kinship and his familiarity with the ancient customs. None have had his infectious, Jewish common touch, which made Jews everywhere feel they really mattered. Politics aside, under his tutelage Israel and the Diaspora bonded with spirited spontaneity. For Jews everywhere sensed that prime minister Menachem Begin was the quintessential Jew.

The writer is a veteran diplomat and served on the personal staff of five Israeli prime ministers and is soon to publish his memoirs and reminisces.